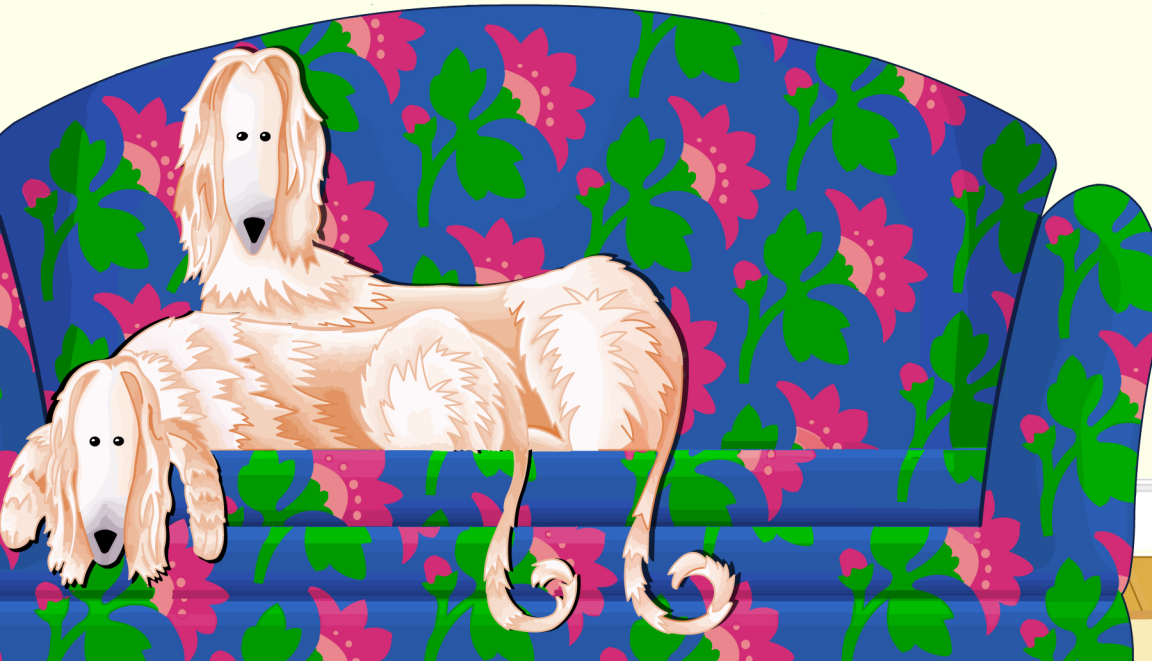
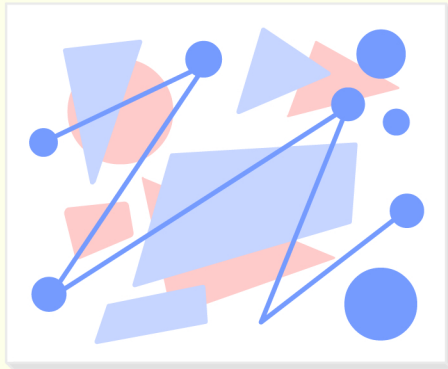


THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER



DODGY GEEZERS

SATIRICAL DUO TREVOR LEVER AND PETER JONES ON CLASS STRUGGLES, PACKAGE HOLIDAYS AND ORGANISED CRIME

SHEFFIELD SIGNPOSTS

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THE DIABLO! AUTHOR SHARES HIS ADVENTURE WRITING SECRETS

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

For a boy with a fertile imagination, and an obsession with the Fighting Fantasy books, *Twin Kingdom Valley* whisked me through the screen and into a fantasy world of babbling brooks, Forests, Orcs, Trolls, Goblins, Dragons, Kings and treasure!

I played as many adventures as I could, but It wasn't until I owned a ZX Spectrum and Fergus McNeill's *The Big Sleaze* that I encountered the same immersion with another game. A friend and I spent many weekends hunched over the keyboard, notepad and pen, determined that Sam Spillade would find the missing Maltese Bullfinch.

I'm therefore delighted that both Fergus and Trevor feature in this celebration of classic adventure games, along with many other adventures and authors that transported legions of other kids to far flung corners of their own imagination.

Mark James Hardisty, 2018



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RAIDERS OF THE LOST PARSER

Stefan Vogt and Tim Gilberts don their archaeologist fedoras and head for Spain in search of fabled conquistador treasure, the Diseñador de aventuras de Aventuras AD – the lost adventure parser.

There's an argument that the mainstream 8-bit adventure market peaked in 1987, with its decline arrested by the publication of Gilsoft's *Professional Adventure Writing System* [PAWS] and Incentive's *Graphic Adventure Creator* [GAC], enabling continuing releases from die-hard independent developers and the occasional budget title. The writing was on the wall as the Atari ST and Amiga nibbled their way into bedrooms up and down the land, and adventure authors looked for tools that would enable them to make the transition to the new-fangled machines.

Magnetic Scrolls and Level 9 [and Infocom in the US] had an advantage, with 16-bit ready interpreters, but amateur adventure authors, in the

DAAD DOWNLOADS

Stefan Vogt and Tim Gilberts are continuing their mission to recover and preserve a complete record of Gilsoft's Adventure Systems for the "Tales from the 8-bit era" website.

It's already overflowing with information and downloads for *The Quill* [including an unreleased 4-word parser variant for the Commodore 64 and a "lost" disk version for Acorn machines], *The Illustrator* and *The Professional Adventure Writer*, and has recently been updated to include *DAAD* archives.

They have completed the archives released by Andrés and incorporated new versions of the tools from Gilberts' own archives. "The first thing we did is we separated the actual system from the historical important AAD files. That's why you can download two files on the official page. The system itself, and the Aventuras AD preservation files" explains Stefan, "The latter archive contains master disks from their game releases and scans of the original disks. This is relevant for historical reasons only and not necessary for you to download it to work with the system."

A third download has recently been added that includes custom templates to enable the ability to write adventures in the German language using *DAAD*.

Head over to Stefan's site below:

<http://8-bit.info/infinite-imaginations-aventuras-ad/>

majority, were left out in the cold with only Sean Ellis' *GAC* evolving into the 16-bit era as the *Atari ST Adventure Creator* or *STAC*. Amiga and ST versions of *PAWS* were abandoned, along with the proposed C64 and QL release. "That particular horse never really left the stables" Tim Gilberts told Retro Gamer. A PC port was also made by Graeme Yeandle, it seems for his own amusement, never seeing a commercial release or official support from Gilsoft.

As sales dwindled, Tim founded Infinite Imaginations, his own freelance company that contracted to existing software houses porting *Quilled* adventures across platforms and providing other specialist programming services. He was commissioned by long-time collaborator Fergus McNeil, and together they co-authored *The System Without A Name*, or *SWAN* for his Delta 4 and Abstract Concepts label.

"[*SWAN*] was essentially *PAWS+*" recalls McNeill, "it used most of the same logic and processing, but with a few extra features, better access and manipulation of variables".

Those extra features included icons, non-player character AI and a sophisticated parser, along with the ability to use a single source databases to target multiple platforms. McNeill's only published game authored with *SWAN* was *Mindfighter*, released across a broad church of Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad, Atari ST and Amiga computers. After Fergus was let down by his publishers, Abstract Concepts and Delta 4 folded, and the *SWAN* system was never polished beyond a hotchpotch collection of utilities, only useful it seemed, in the experienced hands of McNeill.

Despite the setback, the idea was sound, and in 1988 Tim accepted a commission to create an in-house, multi-platform adventure engine for Spanish publisher Aventuras AD [AAD]. The Spanish adventure market was maturing, and 8-bit sales were more robust than the UK, which had already moved on. Tim immersed himself into Spanish culture, moving to Valencia to work alongside Andrés Samudio and his AAD colleagues directly on the project. He set about learning the language and studied how the Spanish games industry operated.

He built upon the *SWAN* workflows to create the *Diseñador de aventuras de Aventuras AD* [*Adventure Designer for Aventuras AD*], or

DAAD for short. Whereas *SWAN* was *PAWS+*, *DAAD* became *SWAN+*, with an extended programming language that included loops, indirections [the ability to reference a flag using a name for example] and the powerful ability to define objects with attributes – removing the heavy lifting required from the programmer in previous incarnations of their systems.

[Tim] Andrés had his own ideas on the way to take it forward including proper symbol handling. The compiler was PC based from Graeme's port of *PAWS* rather than the Atari ST [version], although I think we did [...] leverage the *SWAN* work.

DAAD evolved into a collection of command-line tools, with a compiler similar to *PAWS for CPC* and *SWAN*, with development versions created for the Atari ST and PC. Using SCE source files, the resultant binaries could target a wide-range of machines including the IBM PC, Amiga, Atari ST, MSX, Spectrum, Amstrad [CPC and PCW] and for the first time, the Commodore 64 [having missed out on a version of *PAWS*]. It came with a huge price tag [between £10,000 and £15,000] but using *DAAD* and a PC 1640, AAD authored a catalogue of superb games including *La Aventura Original* [*The Original Adventure*] and the popular Ci-U-Tham Trilogy; *Cozumel* [a Mayan island in the Caribbean explored by the Spanish in the 1600s], *Los Templos Sagrados* [*The Sacred Temples*] and *Chichén Itzá* [A Mayan city familiar to the Spanish].

After Aventuras AD ceased trading in 1992, it seemed *DAAD*, alongside *SWAN*, would be lost forever - its exclusive use as an internal tool meant that it was never made public. Several conservation sites, including the *PAWS* Reservoir had made overtures to the creators for a release, but with little success. Recovering *DAAD* had always been a desire of Gilberts, and became part of the preservation masterplan when he collaborated with Stefan Vogt in 2017 to document and release Gilsoft's entire *Adventure System* catalogue. After releasing *The Quill* and *PAWS*, they turned their attention to *DAAD* and explored the recent discovery of disks found by Andrés stumbling around in his loft a year earlier. The recovered version was a bit of a mish-mash and unorganised - a mixture of database and utility files in Spanish and documentation in English.

[Stefan] [...] [It] was basically a system in an incomplete and partly unusable state. There are interpreters for English and Spanish for each of the target platforms, [and] the English interpreters were all missing. The Aventuras AD crew deleted them from the disks because they [didn't] need them. They also deleted the English language database template, which is the file you need to start writing an English game.

Tim delved into his own archives, and together with Stefan were able to piece together the missing interpreters, database templates and rebuild the corrupt C64 disk set from the Samudio files.

[Stefan] It took countless hours to recreate the system. Tim recompiled much of the English [and Spanish] interpreters from his own [...] development sources, which were newer than [the] AAD [versions].

After a lengthy period of debugging, Vogt created several new tools to aid and streamline development on modern systems. One of these is *ACHTUNG*, a tool that appends a C64 header to a C64 database file enabling the binary to be dragged and dropped from the development machine onto the target machine.

[Stefan] We had 2018 in mind when we thought about how a new *DAAD* could work. [...] Back in the day you transferred a game via a cable and an interface, so the transfer tool added the header to your C64 database. On the C64 disk we also added loader templates to load an English game, on the Spectrum disk we added a merger tool to get your game files into one binary for tape distribution and so on. Stuff like this never existed in *DAAD*.

The resultant collection is an impressive package, with all of the documentation updated to cover the substantial new iterations of the software, and the addition of tools for the 21st century author. The "A worked example in modern times" chapter in the 2018 manual covers



[Above] Stefan Vogt has ported *Hibernated I* from the *Quill'd* Commodore 64 original to virtually every conceivable platform using the new version of *DAAD*. Here is the spin-off adventure, *Hibernated: Eight Feet Under* [included as a bonus adventure with physical versions of *Hibernated I*], running under *DAAD* and compiled for the Commodore Amiga.

using a modern operating system [Linux, Mac or Windows], a modern graphics editor [*Grafix2* or *Multipant*], *Visual Studio* [with the help of a syntax highlighter by *Adventuron* author Chris Ainsley] and *DOSBox* in order to create a game.

[Stefan] You can edit your adventure in a modern editor with modern highlighting, and you compile it in *DOSBox*. The highlighter [...] is one of the most important features of the new release, [and] will show you when you entered something wrong. [...] Like I said, we wanted *DAAD* to be easily usable in 2018. [...] It is not suitable for everyone though as some skills are necessary to get your games mastered. It's not like you hit a button as you do in *PAWS* to save your game to a tape.

The new instructions are welcome, but perhaps could be simplified further into better step-by-step stages, or even given the full video tutorial treatment for the layman developer. From scanning the guide, it looks to be straight-forward if you are developing a text-only game, but there is some effort required in converting illustrations across formats. There's still support for line and fill in the 8-bit versions, but with bitmaps supported, it may depend on the tenacity of the amateur developer to re-engineer the correct resolution and colour versions for each platform.

All credit must go to Tim and Stefan and their continued efforts. Vogt is a one-man whirlwind of enthusiasm for the project, and a force for good in the world of adventures. His own game, *Hibernated 1*,



[Above] Spain's Aventuras AD were a popular and prolific developer of high-quality adventure games in the late 80s and early 90s. Tim Gilberts created *DAAD* for the company, who went onto release many titles using the system - here for example, is *La Aventura Original* [*The Original Adventure* - based upon *Colossal Caves*] running on a ZX Spectrum.

originally developed using the Commodore 64 version of *The Quill* has now been ported to [almost – we are still waiting the Acorn Electron version] every viable platform known to man using the CP/M version of *PAWS*, and now enhanced using *DAAD*.

[Stefan] *DAAD* will be the tool of choice for my next games, starting with *Hibernated: Eight Feet Under* - the bonus adventure for the upcoming physical release of *Hibernated 1*. How could I recover such an amazing tool that provides a sophisticated parser easily on par with Infocom and then not use it?

Certainly the appetite for searching out and preserving these software relics remains. Tim has previously hinted that a Dragon 32 version of *The Quill* may still be recoverable, and is well along the path of creating a brand new version of *PAWS* for the Spectrum Next. We can only hope, wait, and see if future digital antiquities are unearthed.

[Stefan] That can probably be only answered by Tim. I know though that there is a *PAWS* interpreter for C64, which was contract work for St. Brides and CRL. It allowed running a *PAW'd* Spectrum game on the C64. The converter tool threw a few exceptions on us, so we are not sure if it will ever see the light of day. We also have the *SWAN* system from Delta 4, which we want to release at a later date. Fergus has already given his blessing.

TERRY GREER

Having been involved in the game industry since its inception, industry legend **Terry Greer** has created artwork for a myriad of companies, including iconic adventure game inlays and illustrations for *Interceptor Micros*.

Greer's first exposure to the early 1980s British games industry was when he accompanied a friend to a computer fair held in Westminster. His friend had written a competent *Centipede* clone called, cunningly, *Centapede* for the Lynx computer, and the two boys sought to make their fortune selling their hand-duplicated creation to an enthusiastic public.

[Terry Greer] [...] I don't think he sold one copy. Back then a lot of sales in the UK were still done from small ads in magazines and fairs like that one we went to. In the UK companies were still small and games typically had only one or two developers working on them. It was still a bedroom industry back then and sales of several thousand copies were deemed a huge success.

Terry hadn't produced any art to include in the game, but he did create some eye-catching work for the sales stand, and worked on the illustrations for the game cover.

I just went along to hang up artwork, hoping that someone might want some for their own games. I also did a cover for his game, which was basically just a photo of a piece of artwork folded into being a cassette inlay.

Despite the lack of sales, the long journey from the North of England wasn't completely wasted as Terry's work on the stand did, as planned, attract the attention of other exhibitors.

That's where I got my first contacts with a company called Anirog and with Quillsoft, though it's a bit hazy now. *Interceptor* came a little later, but not much, I think because they were printing Anirog covers. Back then *Interceptor* also did a



lot of duplication and printing for other software companies, and I certainly got some work through because of that.

The work reflected the state of the industry at that time. There was a rush to churn out as much software as possible, regardless of quality. The thirst and demand for games outstripped the supply. Some of Terry's finished pieces could take as little as 7 hours from start to finish, but despite working in the "low end of the market", one title did stand out during that period for Greer.

Savage Pond [A fishy collect-em-up published by Starcade] was an exception, and that took a lot more time. I was also doing a weekly cartoon for the local paper, and it was useful to have a wad of those to backup my character/cartoon style in discussions.

As the professionalism of the industry evolved, so did the demand on Terry as an artist. From the quick and dirty pen and pencil sketches, and rough painted work, inlays began to be full-colour, airbrushed, or painted to a higher standard.

I did well over 200 covers for the companies I worked for. [...] *Empire of Kahn*, *Wheelin Wally & Trolly Wally*, *China Miner*, *Arabian Nights*, *Burger Time*, *Cuddly Gbert*, *Crystals of Icarus*, *Plummet*, *Chopper Squad*, *Spider and the Fly*, *Falcon Fighter*, *Star Trek*, *Aquonaut* and *Big Ben*. I've lost track, there's so many more including the adventures by David Banner (*Message from Andromeda*, *The Pit*, *Warlord*) and then there's all the other companies such as Anirog, and Gilsoft for their adventures.

The *Interceptor* work is the most recognised and revered of Greer's portfolio of work. *Heroes of Karn* was a cover well remembered by many adventure players - and recreated on the cover of *The Classic Adventurer* Issue 3.

[...] I enjoyed doing that - though it was a rushed job, I think I started it one evening and it went off the following day before last post. I knew nothing about the game really, just that there was a castle on a cliff, and it seemed a good idea to use that as a central focus. There's no real attempt at realism with it, its intended to have a slight dream/nightmare-like quality - hence the running. It's one of the ones I'm most happy with, and I'm honoured you took it as inspiration.

Terry was asked to move into the digital world and create game images for the companies he was working for. He started using the traditional method of composing images on graph paper, converting the 8 pixel patterns to hexadecimal numbers, typing these directly into an assembler.

It was tedious, until graphic software caught up a little. I bought my first ever floppy disk, monitor and graphics tablet to use with the Spectrum. I still have fond memories of working on that setup.

Terry didn't get access to any adventures in order to play them and invent graphics, instead he received the text transcript from the game which helped him visualise each setting.

After that it was come up with an idea and try it out. There was some discussion, but generally I had a free hand to do whatever I thought would look interesting.

Greer and *Interceptor* Micros programmer David Banner created a formidable team designing their own scripting language for the creation of graphics within games.

[...] It was basically just a long string of characters, starting with a code value that defined the action to be carried out. It was based largely upon the on-screen location of a 'cursor' with instructions such as [moving] position to another location, XY either absolute or relative, [then] another command could be draw line, [with] colour to a new XY position. Another command would be to flood fill from that location, or set one or a line of 8x8 cells to a specific ink/paper colour. [You could also] print a specific byte pattern, or a series of byte patterns almost like a sprite.

The capabilities of the script mirrored the crudeness of routines

found within existing games of the time, but the addition of byte patterns and individually engineered bitmap graphics enhanced the elegance of many of Terry's illustrations.

I can't remember the entire language now, and it did become quite sophisticated over time allowing for scaling and repeated macros. The macros were really just complete images that were defined and called by an ID, and could therefore be used to overlay another image. But writing it was all hand-crafted and tedious to do. Some parts were worked out on graph paper first, but others were done on the fly by editing the string and running it to see what happened. It wasn't friendly, but it was very efficient. While I designed what I wanted, David was the one that had to make it work, which is the harder thing to do. I couldn't code in those days, and wish I'd learnt earlier.

The bitmapped areas certainly made the graphics more complex than those found within peer titles of the time. But it wasn't without a cost. In the main, *Interceptor* games in particular had fewer graphics, but of a higher quality.

[...] Getting the game and 10 to 12 images into a 48k Spectrum's memory was tricky. There really wasn't much of an alternative back then. I dare say that a compression algorithm may well have worked as well, but initial experiments weren't that efficient, and we had very little space to play with. I wanted to be able to create detailed bitmapped areas, for example bushes, items or characters, and include those as many times as I needed. That required a way to distinguish between simple graphic line and fill graphics with pixel-based graphics to get the best from both [worlds].

It was graph paper, and trial and error to convert hand drawn images into a format that could be coded into the language that Terry and David devised. It took a keen eye and some clever manipulation of the language and tools available to produce some stunning designs.

[...] And a lot of time! You still had to compose pictures with an eye for them being simple. [...] Defining an area and filling it were still the most efficient ways of doing things, and the most visually pleasing. Trying to decide how to repeat elements without making it look too obvious was also another thing.

Further complexity came with the range of home micros available at the time. Games had to support as many platforms as possible. For adventures, porting a text-based interpreter was an easy task. Adding graphics support was more complicated - especially for machines with a varying range of graphics capabilities.

That wasn't too bad from my perspective, David probably had it worse with the coding. I only ever used the system on displays using square pixels - i.e. not the Commodore 64. While there were some changes, they tended to be in the actual draw code rather than in the graphic elements themselves.

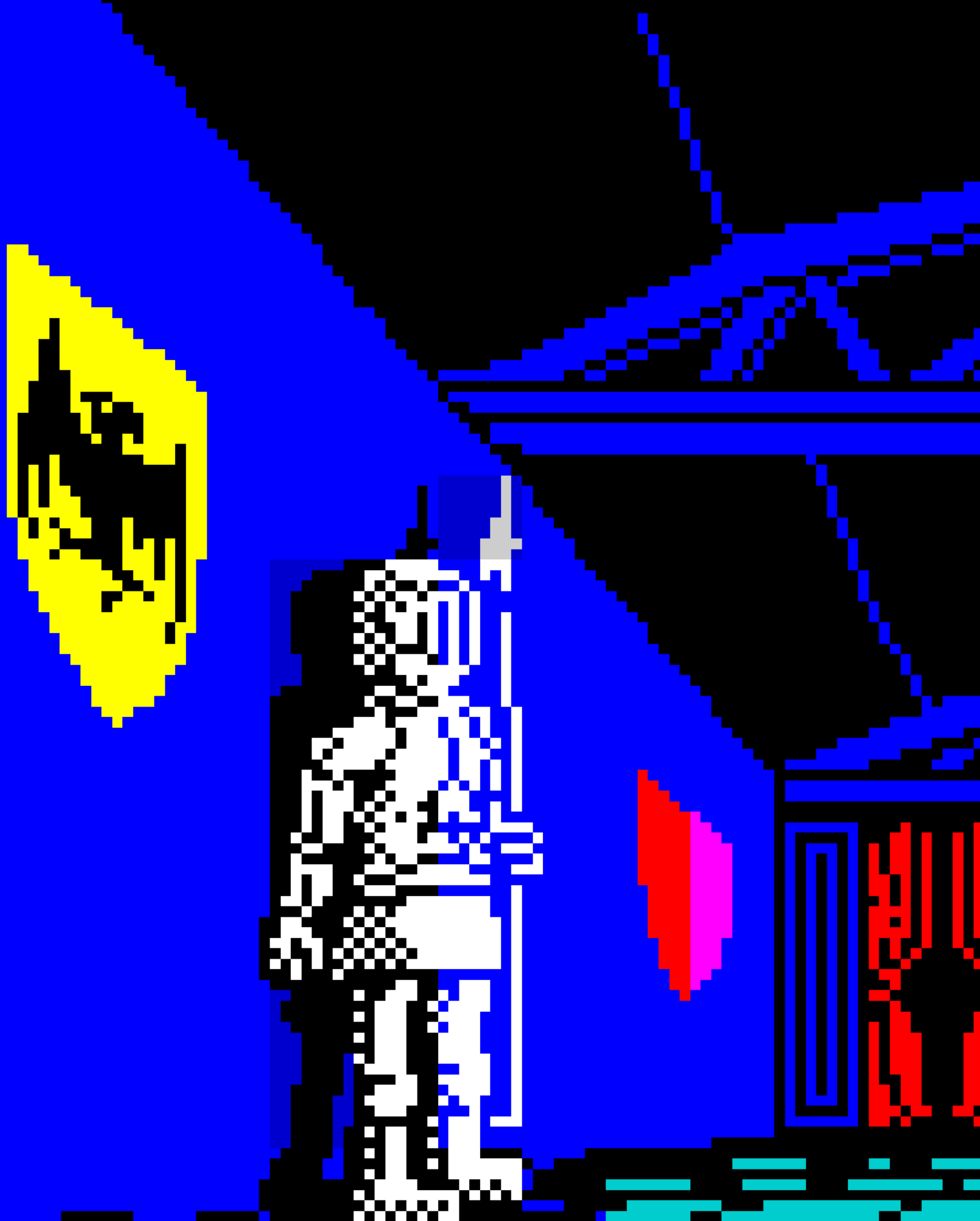
For the changes to be made solely to the draw code suggests that illustrations were drawn isolated from a desired target machine. There was no restriction in terms of layout or colours from what Terry would originally design.

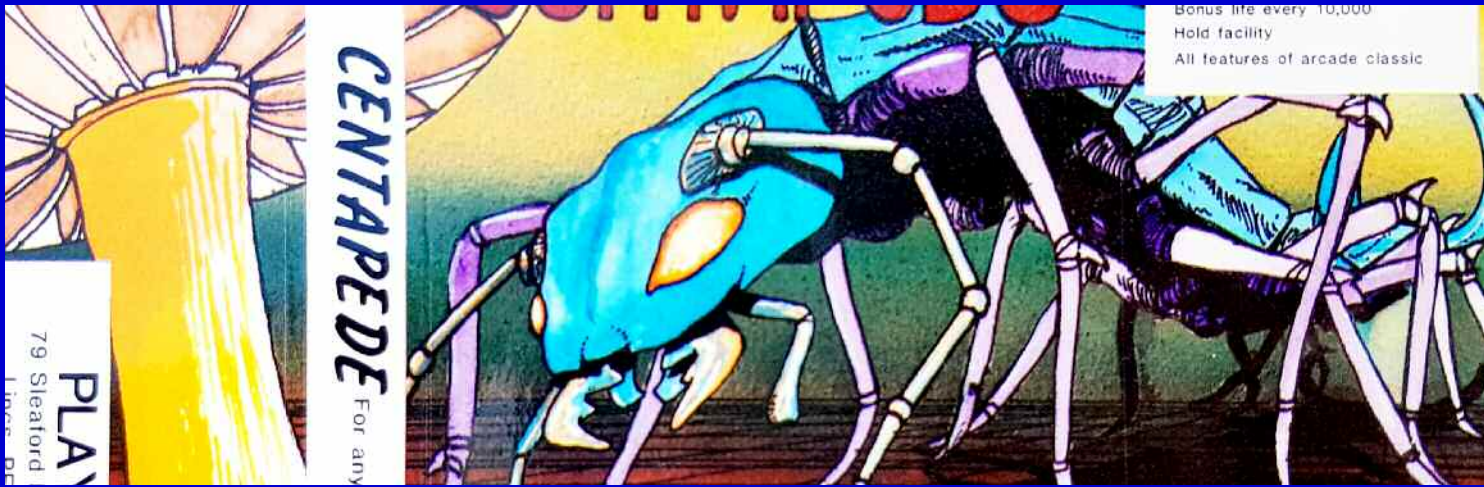
[The] differences [were] largely down to the way in which colour was stored. The Spectrum was particularly hard as every 8 pixel line consisted of a byte of data, with another byte which specified the paper and ink colour, and a strange single bit that set the colour to normal or bright. Though this nuance never worked on the [TV] I used so I tended to ignore that.

But the same commands were used, just different parameters. Despite that I preferred the Spectrum to the C64 - which had more colours, but brick-shaped pixels that I absolutely loathed.

The Commodore's brick pixels aside, the ZX Spectrum and its unusual attribute system pushed the talents of many pixel artists. Greer used it to his advantage, and created a series of Spectrum adventure images that took advantage of a luscious palette.

[The Spectrum] forced you to think graphically, and in terms of solid





blocks of colour with simple ink detail, rather than painterly. You also had to think hard about diagonals and any lines and shadows where you wanted multiple colours and plan how to get there. The Spectrum has a very special place in my heart. The attribute system made it more a puzzle, and sometimes solving that was very satisfying.

Ultimately I much preferred the Amstrad though as once you created your palette everything was straightforward, it also was easier to get the correct graphical look with it. [...] The 4 colour mode was great, and you had a good, if weird, choice of colours. Mainly though you could place those 4 square pixels anywhere you wanted without restrictions, which I really liked. After that - the ST over the Amiga - it was such a simple flat system with very few modes to consider. Also, as you always had to create for the lowest common denominator, and both the ST and Amiga tended to have similar amounts of RAM, a 32 colour palette took up a fair bit more space than a 16 colour one and few companies wanted to spend the time and money to implement a different set of graphics.

There was a cost to producing the level of quality Terry wanted in his imagery. The Interceptor engine did sacrifice speed and performance in order to include bitmapped graphic elements, and in some cases the rendering of a scene could take up to 30 seconds. It was difficult to get the balance right.

I just tried not to make the drawings take too long, it was all rule of thumb really. They were different days then, players didn't have such short attention spans - hell just think how long they took to load in the first place. [...] Besides they only drew the first time, though they could be triggered again if required. This meant that there was a degree of anticipation, so players were a bit more forgiving. I can't honestly say that the draw order was designed to increase this anticipation, but it was handled from back to front so that foreground objects could sit in front of background ones, and this necessitated a way of clearing out shapes before detail was added. Some images certainly did take longer to happen than I'd have liked.

Alongside Interceptor, other commissions materialised. Terry took a chance to work with Tim and Howard Gilberts at Gilsoft. He created cover artwork and illustrators on their Gold Collection of adventure games.

Tim and Howard were great. I wish I'd been more proactive at leaning *The Quill* and creating my own adventures, but with all the artwork I just didn't have time. Ironically I'm now looking into using and customising text and dialogue systems in *Unity*, and have a few ideas as to how to create more interactive adventures. I guess the recent renaissance by companies such as Telltale have rekindled my interest in dialogue-based games.

Terry's relationship with Gilsoft continued when the Welsh firm released *The Illustrator* add-on for *The Quill*. This clever piece of software extended the original adventure engine to allow graphics to be included in a game. It used a similar plot, line and fill method that

[Above] Terry Greer's first inlay artwork, *Centapede*, created and manually duplicated for a friend to sell at a Westminster computer fair.

Terry had devised for Interceptor, but his expertise was only required to provide the stunning cover artwork. Once the adventure market stagnated, Terry moved onto game design and artwork roles for other companies on a varied range of games.

[...] I was moving away from single pieces of artwork to represent an image, and wanted to create location artwork algorithmically using lots of separate pieces. I was working with a company in London on a game that was never released called *Arktipelago*, set aboard a generation spaceship. Each location had an algorithm that generated a unique picture depending on what was in the location, which direction the player was facing and considered what locations were visible [...] It gave tens of thousands of unique views, all of which were navigable. Sadly the company working on it went bankrupt and the game died. I sadly don't have any mages of it now as all disks became corrupt.

In a career in videogames spanning over three decades his work can be found in diverse titles such as *The Last Ninja 2*, *Flaklypa Grand Prix* and the *XCOM* series.

[Of] the art I've created I'm happiest with [the] adventure games. I [am] really pleased with some of the work I did on *Jewels of Babylon* and *Warlord*, and the minimal animation in *Aftershock*. From others, *The Hobbit* was quite nicely done, however, it wasn't until later machines and games such as *The Pawn*, which had some great images, and was definitely an influence, or graphic adventures such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* when I actually started liking graphic adventures. [I really loved] *The Last Express* though it had a huge budget and more or less killed Brøderbund.

Terry is now passing on his vast wealth to the next generation of game developers and adventure writers as a Senior Lecturer in Game Design at Falmouth University. He very rarely returns to put pixels onto paper.

The last time was really at Christmas as teaching takes up most of my time now, but I do have several projects I'm working on. [...] Given my rate of progress they may never get finished - but you never know, and nowadays it's so much easier. Systems like *Unity* make it really easy to create whatever you want, in whatever style you like, so a lot of artwork now is style driven from the start as a choice, rather than the platform itself largely proscribing the overall style. [...] Hopefully I'll be able to set more time aside for game dev.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Terry Greer's ship, carrying the Jewels of Babylon is attacked by a band of cut-throat pirates on route from West Africa. He manages to escape to a nearby island taking the treasure of five text adventures with him.

Leather Goddesses of Phobos [Infocom, 1986] would be one I'd like to finish. I loved what I played, but lost my scratch and sniff card, and never got around to finishing it.

I'm still ashamed to say I've never played *Zork*, [Infocom, 1980] and considering its importance to the development of adventures I really should.

Legend Entertainment's *Gateway* [1992] is another that sort of passed me by and I'd like to play. When it came out I was gutted as I'd been trying to also create a game based on Frederick Pohl's Heechee stories. I was so annoyed I'd been beaten to it that I ignored it, but I'd be interested in giving it a go now.

Of more recent games I'd also love to make time to play *80 Days* [2014] from Inkle Studios.

However, if it has to remain old school, then what I'd really like would be *The Quill* and *The Illustrator* and a Spectrum with a decent DK-Tronics keyboard, a proper floppy drive, a proper multisynch monitor and a graftab to draw with - like the setup I used to have back then. That way I could take my time and learn to create some adventures myself from scratch, after all I'd have lots of time.



WHODUNNIT?

We love a good detective yarn, a whodunit, a plot twisting, puzzle mystery climaxing with a satisfying payoff seeing the protagonist cornering and getting their man (or woman). From Victorian Deerstalkered Sleuths, to 1930's American Private Dicks and modern PC Plods, **The Classic Adventurer** picks up a magnifying glass and takes a closer look at the best software sleuths.



SHERLOCK

Melbourne House, 1984

Sherlock was in discussion at Melbourne House six months before *The Hobbit* was completed. Author Philip Mitchell adapted the departing Veronika Meglar's *Hobbit* engine for this classic murder mystery starring Conan Doyle's defacto sleuth.

Whereas the use of the sophisticated English language and parser was over-complicated for *The Hobbit*, its expansive mechanism suited *Sherlock* better. The game has an intricate plot, much better writing, and a greater call for character interaction - though this involves saying "Hello" quite often.

Though the NPCs went about their business with measured purpose, *Sherlock* still suffered from the same chaotic bugs and "emergent behaviour" of its predecessor. Despite this, and the reliance on having to be in the right place at the right time in order to solve the case, *Sherlock* is a standout game in the genre.



THE SECRET OF BASTOW MANOR

Softgold, 1983

The Secret of Bastow Manor doesn't mention Sherlock Holmes, but it does feature a dear stalker wearing doppelganger on the cover of the VIC-20 release - complete with magnifying glass.

Its influences are further uncovered when you dig into the game and find a story heavily inspired by Conan Doyle's gripping phantom horror, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

With a very basic parser, limited text, slow responses and simple ASCII graphics for locations [later improved by Dotsoft for its SEGA SC-3000 version] it's not the most sophisticated of adventures. What it is though, is an atmospheric and challenging game, typical of an early Softgold release.

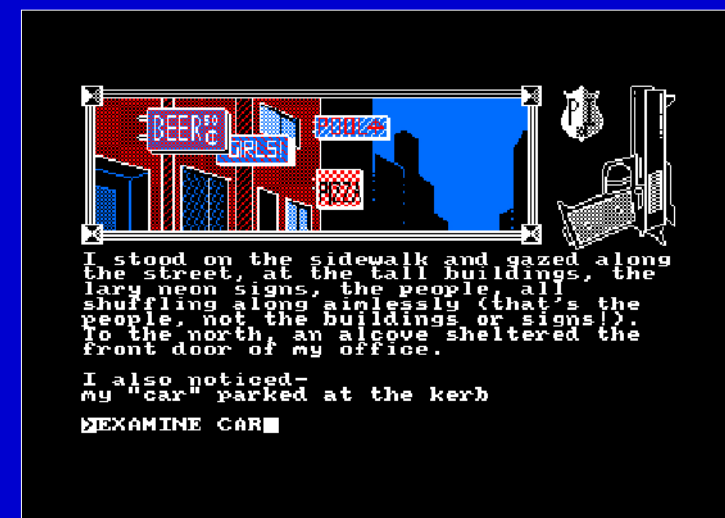


SCAPEGHOST

Level 9, 1989

Originally called *Spook*, *Scapeghost* is the final adventure released by Level 9. You are - or were - an undercover cop, killed whilst trying to infiltrate a drugs gang. Returning in the game as a ghost, you have to track down your killers and bring them to justice.

Super-stylish, underrated and showcasing some of the best 16-bit graphics of the time, *Scapeghost* is an intricate and atmospheric adventure with a haunting storyline of ghostly revenge.



THE BIG SLEAZE

Piranha, 1987

The de facto detective noir adventure from adventure author extraordinaire Fergus McNeill at the top of his game. Throw *The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man* in the mix together with *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* and *Gumshoe*, add a huge dash of trademark Delta 4 humour, a development team with a mastery of *The Quill*, and you end up with *The Big Sleaze*.



THE DAN DIAMOND TRILOGY

Salamander Software, 1983

The Dragon 32 was a fertile ground for text adventures, with ports of Scott Adams' and Brian Howarth's adventures just some of the quality titles found on the maligned Welsh computer. Salamander Software was one of the better known software houses that supported the machine, releasing the Dan Diamond trilogy of games in oversized clam cases embossed with distinctive artwork.

You play the role of Dan Diamond, a former cop turned Private Detective (aren't they all?) who receives a letter pleading for help. Though they can be played in isolation, all three games follow a sequential plot, starting with a familiar Raymond Chandler-esque introduction, through to *Hammer Horror* and finally onto *Space Fantasy*. In the first game, Diamond gets a call for aid, and is plunged into a mysterious crypt in *Franklin's Tomb*, then becomes *Lost In Space* by getting transported to a spaceship via a stargate from the forementioned vault, and finally tied back to the original game in *Fishy Business*, landing the spaceship on a remote island hoping to find the identity of the original plea for help.

There's very little detective work, and the game's presentation is somewhat lacklustre having a screen divided into three showing commands, your inventory and objects in your location. But, each title in the trilogy worked around the limitations of the Dragon 32's constrained memory and lack of graphics prowess by providing a Case Book that had a drawing of locations, with several containing clues to solving the game. A neat idea, one that edged a foot in the graphical adventure/bookware camp.

Tomb and *Lost* were released on the BBC Micro (*Fishy Business* remains MIA) and as a *Trilogy* pack on the Tatung Einstein computer. *Franklin in Wonderland*, the first of an aborted no-frills follow-up trilogy had Dan falling down the Mad Hatter's rabbit hole.



SAM MALLARD: THE CASE OF THE MISSING SWAN

Monument Microgames, 2017

Mallard is a graphic adventure game, heavily inspired by film noir, and has a classic and well trodden storyline – jobbing Private Detective is hired by man to find missing wife.

The game starts in Mallard's office after our main protagonist has accepted the case, and follows him off on the hunt of the missing and mysterious Mrs Swan. Dispensing with the traditional typed input of this type of game, *Mallard* presents its information on a well laid-out screen where verb-noun choices are made via a SCUMM-esque "Action" menu by using either the keyboard or Kempston joystick.

Locations are described in an uncomplicated fashion, with the majority having functional and nicely-drawn images in the top right-hand corner. The whole screen is rendered solely in black and white further fuelling the noir atmosphere.

MURDER HE SAID!

Zenobi Software, 1993

The late Jack Lockerby was responsible for a plethora of challenging adventures, and in *Murder He Said!* he takes to task the whodunit genre delivering an engaging murder mystery.

Philip Stowe is the obligatory victim, killed at his lavish stately home, Dundee Manor, where the Stowe family had congregated for an engagement party. As Inspector Vance it's your job to collate evidence and quiz the assembled cast of characters to identify the murderer.

There's a good dose of character interaction [via a nice and simple use of the QUESTION command], and in the necessity of a good detective story, plenty of plot twists that keep you guessing the murderer's identity until the end. It's a well-presented text-only game for the 128K Spectrum only, demonstrating just how much well-written text Lockerby has jammed into it.



I'm in a small side alley next to the lawyer office. I can see an open window, that could be my way inside. However a vicious looking dog is chained to a post and I don't think he'd let me pass that easily.

```

GARAGE
You are inside the garage that
is reserved for visitors to the
estate.
You can see open doors and a
Ford Escort and a Rover.
.....
Exits: OUT
.....
The policeman is here.
GIVE BRIEFCASE
"The briefcase does not require
further examination in the
laboratory Inspector, but I will
return it to the station for
safe keeping."
OUT
  
```

DETECTIVELAND

Cases solved: 0/4 \$10.00

Taken

> take book
As I take it from the shelf, the bookcase pops out from the wall, turning neatly into my foldaway Murphy bed. A photograph flutters out from under the pillow.

> read book
I flip through the book, and an entry catches my eye: "YOUR OFFICE. It's important to maintain a professional image, so make sure your office has tobacco-stained walls, a door with a glass panel with your name on so it reads backwards from the inside, and ideally a faint smell of bad liquor. Rent's high, so save spondulies by living there too. You can get a Murphy bed that folds up into a bookcase - way classier than a mattress under your desk, and the dames love it. Or the guys. Whatever gums your shoe."

> out
Ok
I'm in a dimly lit office building.

> talk to dame
"Step into my office, Miss..."
"Mrs Macdonald," she says smoothly. She steps in, and I follow.

Case opened: THE BIG PICKLE
"It's my husband," says the dame. "He's been missing five days now. Please find him, Mr Rose. I've heard you're the - well, I've heard you're a detective."

save game restore game restart game undo

options credits hints

Talking to: Mrs Macdonald

Ask about: husband home
another woman money
end conversation



I'm in my office.

Exits: out

I can also see:

- Mrs Macdonald talk
- door reading "EVITCETED ETAVIRP"
- filing cabinet open
- Murphy bed fold sleep
- photograph of Ruby take

wait

I'm holding:

- book titled "1001 Detectiving Tips" drop read

I'm also carrying: flashlight wristwatch revolver

money (\$10.00)

DETECTIVELAND

Robin Johnson, 2016

One of the standout entries into the 2016 annual Interactive Fiction competition, *Detectiveland* from Robin Johnson is one of the best games in a new wave of modern interactive fiction titles.

You guide PI Lanson Rose through the mean streets of New Losago, a fictional film noir/prohibition-era US town that's filled with the usual mobsters, dolls, illicit liquor, corrupt cops and a trio of cases waiting for you to solve.

It uses a neat browser-based UI that Johnson has evolved from his previous *Draculand* game. He manages to replicate the feel of a type-in parser, but with a raft of contemporary accessibility options. Johnson was inspired by Scott Adams' games, [his game titles are a play on words of Scott's *Adventureland*] telling Bruno Dias of Giant Bomb "I first had the idea when playing Adams games on my smartphone, [...] everything seemed to fit nicely in the small screen except the need to type."

It's part-way between a text-adventure and point-and-click experience, using interactive hotspots and links that adapt to the context of the game. The engine provides an extra sprinkling of atmosphere with the inclusion of spot music and sound effects and there's a very useful hint system. Handily the browser files can be downloaded to play offline. Highly recommended.

You can play the game here:
<http://versificator.net/detectiveland/>

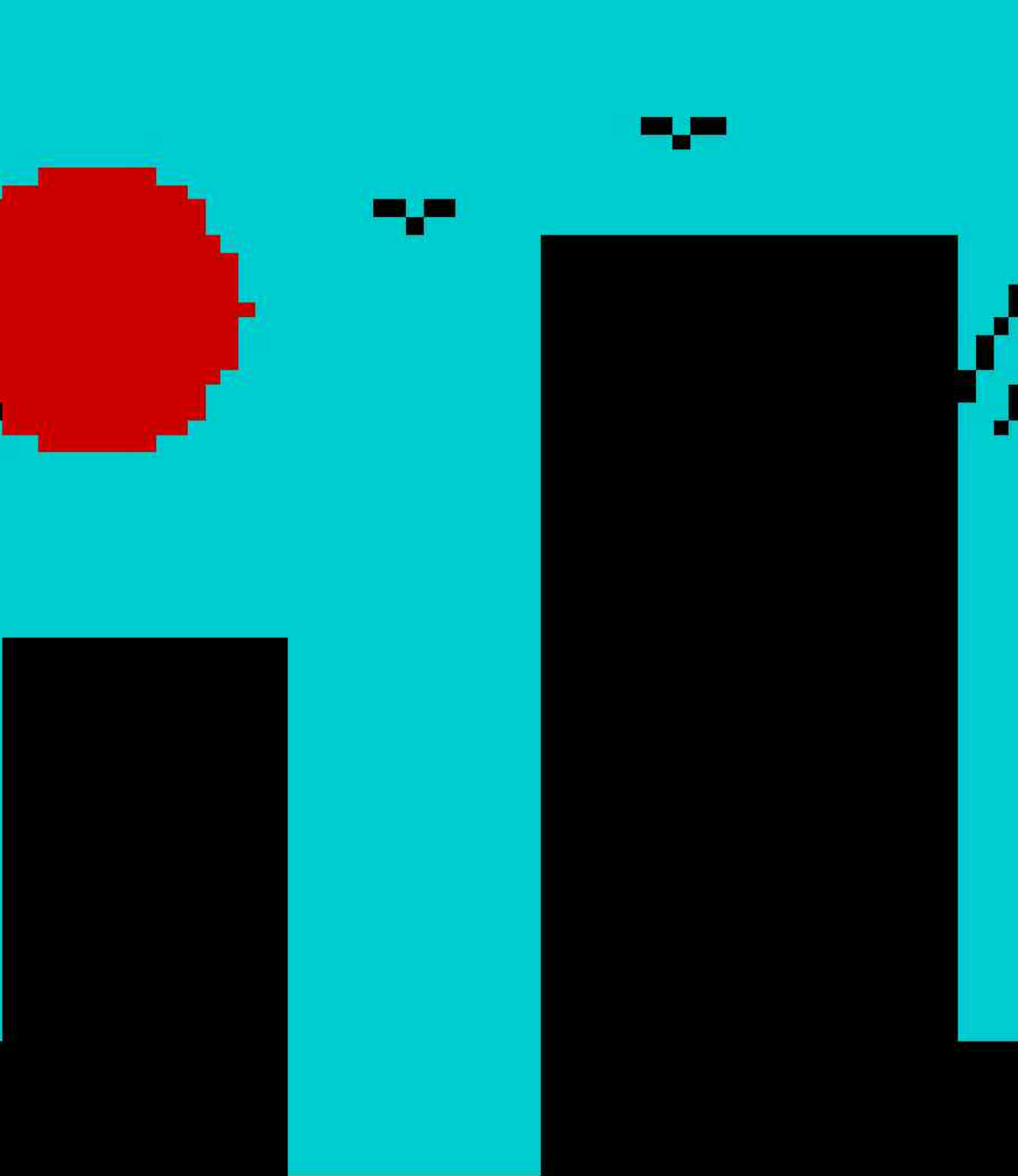


Chicago, 1922. I'm in a street full of bars and pool halls, shot in sepia. Very atmospheric, y'know?
I'm outside Deviney's Bar. The street leads east and west.

BUGSY

CRL, 1986

CRL enlisted the help of Priscilla Langridge and St. Brides School to create this humorous take on organised crime in 1920s Chicago. Instead of the terrifying Al Capone, we are wannabe fluffy bunny mobster, Buggy Maroon, a cute pale-blue rabbit on a mission to rise to the top of the city's crime fraternity. Amongst the usual faire of puns, witty dialogue and functional graphics, St Brides implemented a neat TALK TO feature that offered a LucasArts-esque conversation routine between the various gangsters and low lifes that appear throughout the game.

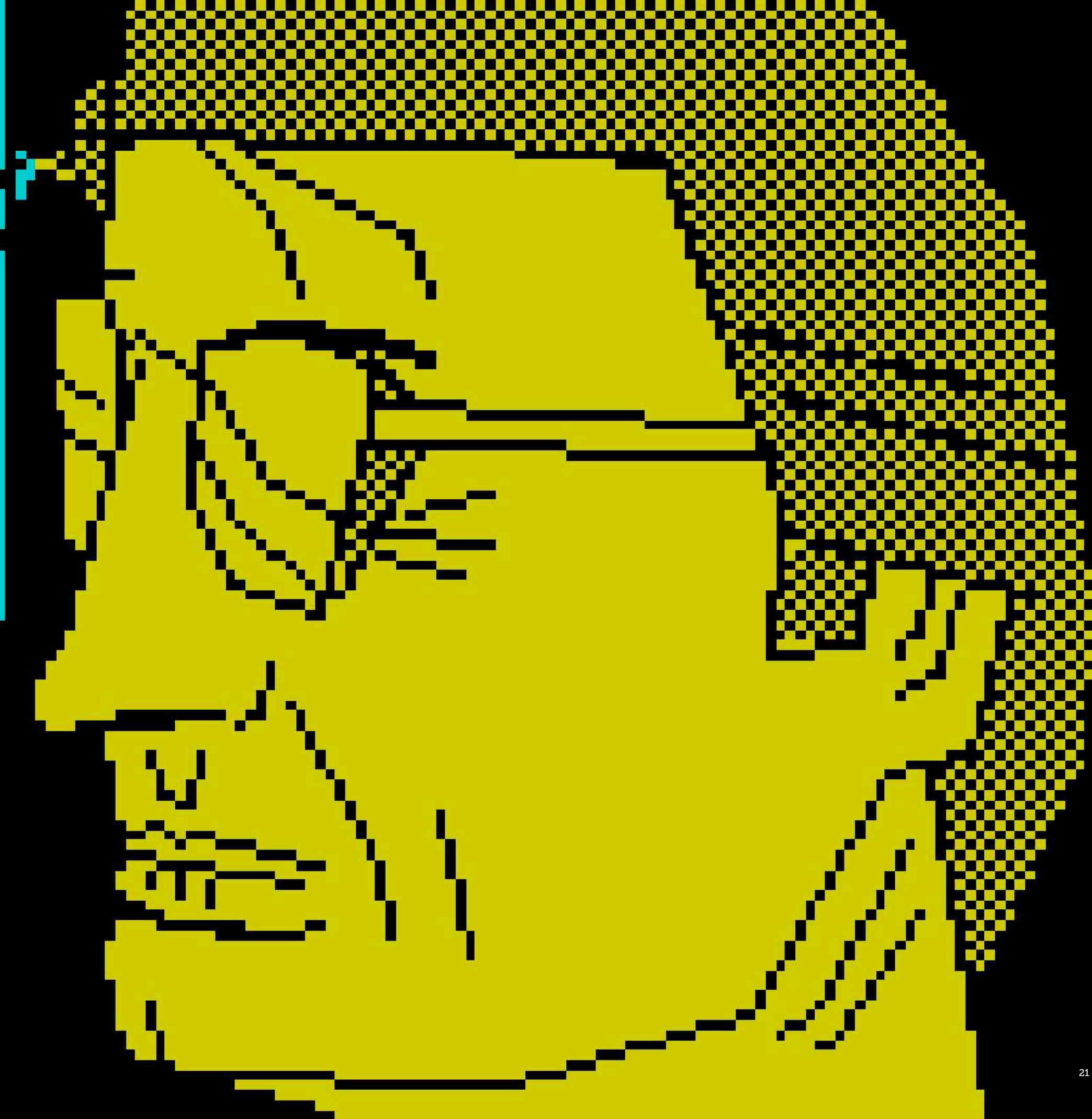


MATT LUCAS

Players Software, 1986

From the mean streets of Miami, Alex Williams' *Matt Lucas* is a GAC'ed adventure casting you as the linen-wearing, Ferrari driving, sun-soaked PI tracking down their missing partner.

Williams deploys a nice writing style and *Lucas* was well worth what was a budget asking price. It suffers from GAC's sluggish response time, but does feature some neat graphics, with Matt's Don Johnson-esque face in several images, and a smart, redefined character set.



The cabby whipped up the horses and we were off along the London streets to Sloane Square. I sat back with a heart-felt sigh of relief.

After a while I became aware that the cab was moving remarkably quickly. A particularly fierce jolt nearly shook me out of my seat. I leaned out to shout at the cabby. A rush of cold air tore the words from my mouth. I had to hang onto the side of the cab for support.

A wild fear seized me: was I being abducted and taken to the man I had seen in the alley? The thought made my mouth suddenly dry. Or - had the cabby somehow recognised me? Was he taking me to Scotland Yard?

I considered my next move...

JACK THE RIPPER

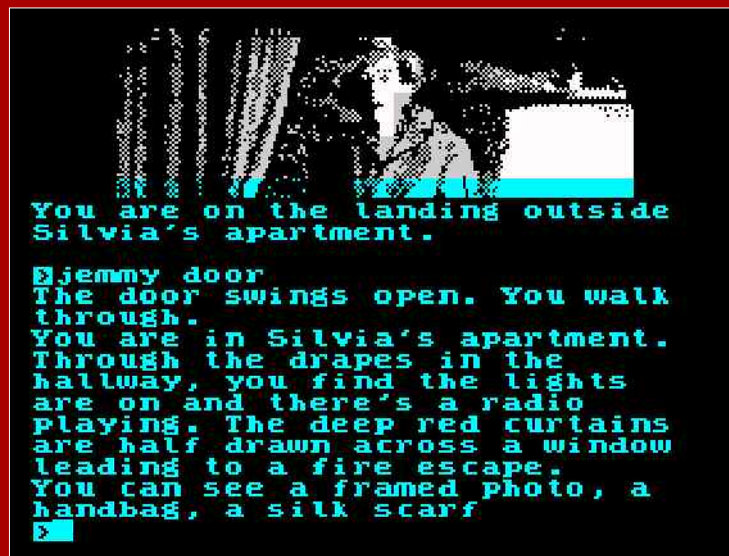
CRL, 1987

Warning: This game is not suitable for anybody of a nervous disposition!

CRL had courted controversy by releasing several of horror-guru Rod Pike's games, but went one further with St Bride's gruesome trudge through the streets of 19th century London. Gripped by a wave of grizzly murders, you are wrongly framed as the "Ripper" and have to clear your name by tracking down the real culprit.

One of the first games to be given a restricted age certificate, *Jack* does live up to the infamy with a set of bloodsoaked and graphic images, complete with a disturbing, but engrossing writing style. Two bits of trivia too: CRL head honcho Clem Chambers had to deny that submitting the game to the British Board of Film Classification, who issued the game with it's 18 certification, was a publicity stunt. After all, the game wasn't subject to the 1984 Video Recordings Act of 1984 since it only referred to "moving images" only.

Oh, and Jared Derett, who provided the bloody images of the victims based the likenesses on his sisters.



PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

Mastertronic Added Dimension, 1986

Adventures from cheapo software houses tended to be lost in the deluge of quantity over quality that washed onto the shelves. There's no surprise that adventure columnists dedicated most of their typewritten hours to established houses and concentrated on higher-end releases. Even budget heavyweight Mastertronic could only muster the smallest review in a single magazine for it's Spectrum-only adventure *Play It Again, Sam*.

It's a shame it didn't get more publicity, as it's a classic detective wheeze that uses GAC to its full potential with splatterings of long and detailed prose, and superb digitized graphics.



SHERLOCK HOLMES IN ANOTHER BOW

Bantam Software, 1985

Another Bow casts the player as an ageing Sherlock Holmes, with trusty companion Dr Watson at his side. Afloat on the SS Destiny they must solve six different, but related crimes that occur whilst aboard. Tagged as "Living Literature" by publisher Bantam Software, it was released in the US for the PC, C64 and Apple machines. The package contains an extensive list of scene-settings feelies, and has lots of charm, especially in its lush location and character graphics that change as our two protagonists and the independent NPCs move around the ship.



PERRY MASON: THE CASE OF MANDARIN MURDER

Telarium, 1986

Telarium released a raft of Howard Boles adventures [*Dragonworld* and *Fahrenheit 451* the others], all using the same engine including this stab (no pun intended) at TV sleuth Perry Mason.

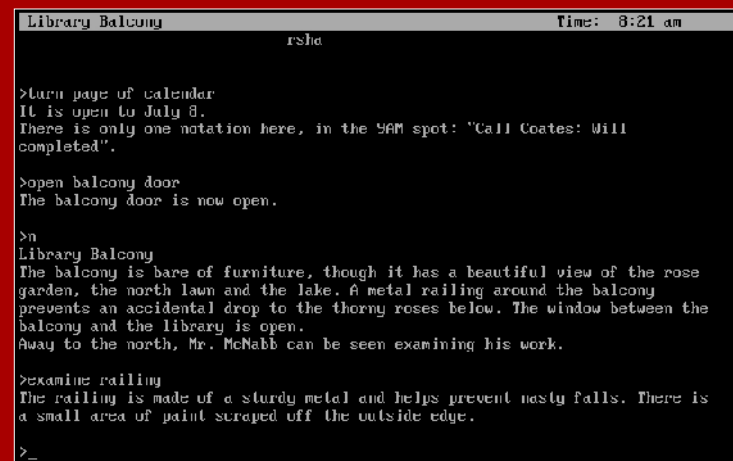
After a rendition of the iconic theme tune, the game starts in an exquisitely furnished living room where a chalk outline of a dead body traces the remains a murdered man, Victor Kapp. His wife, apprehended by the police at home, and in possession of what seems to be the murder weapon, becomes the number one suspect and Mason's client. Playing the fastidious lawyer you collect evidence form the location, and various characters, before the game jumps into a series of examinations in the courtroom where you attempt to ascertain just who is guilty and who isn't.

It's this hustling of witnesses that makes up the bulk of the game [including a delicious SNEER AT WITNESS statement], and following the mechanic of the TV show you can call on sidekick Paul Drake to investigate leads, or ask Della Street to help [with the use of the TIP keyword]. Getting the parser to work is difficult at this stage, even with the game's reputed 800 word vocabulary, but *Mandarin Murder* is a solid attempt at capturing the spirit of the source material, and there's a serious amount of chunky, and recognisable C64 and DOS graphics.

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

Open the casebook on these other detective mysteries:

- Deadline*, Infocom, 1982
- The Curse of Crowley Manor*, Adventure International, 1981
- Sherlock Holmes: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels*, Infocom, 1987
- Murder Off Miami*, CRL, 1986
- Borrowed Time*, Activision, 1985
- Adventures In The Fifth Dimension*, ANALOG Computing, 1983
- Great Peepingham Train Robbery*, Axxent Software, 1989
- Who Done It?*, The Guild Adventure Software, 1985
- 1893: A World's Fair Mystery*, The Illuminated Lantern, 2002



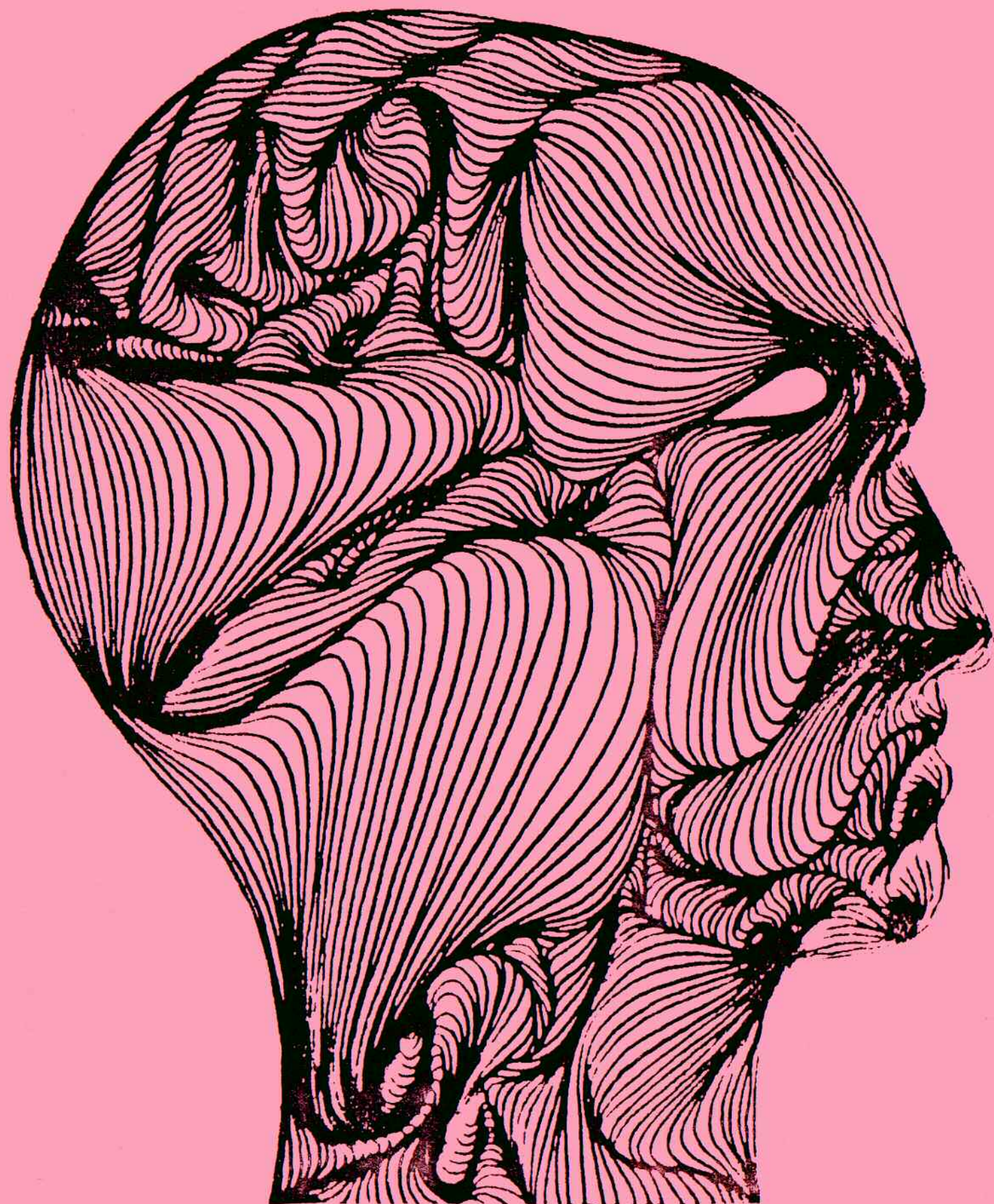
WITNESS

Infocom, 1983

Witness, written by Stuart Galley, is one of the easier Infocom titles where you play a Colt-wielding Detective in Los Angeles of the late 1930s investigating the suicide of a certain Mrs Linder.

There are a small number of locations and characters (with limited interaction), but the prose is up to the standards expected of an Infocom title. The descriptions are engaging and lively, capturing that "hard-boiled" PI feel of the era. If you are lucky enough to obtain a physical copy, then it comes bundled with a beautiful set of feelies including a telegram, suicide note, matchbook and a pulp-fiction era "Detective Gazette".





CHRIS HESTER

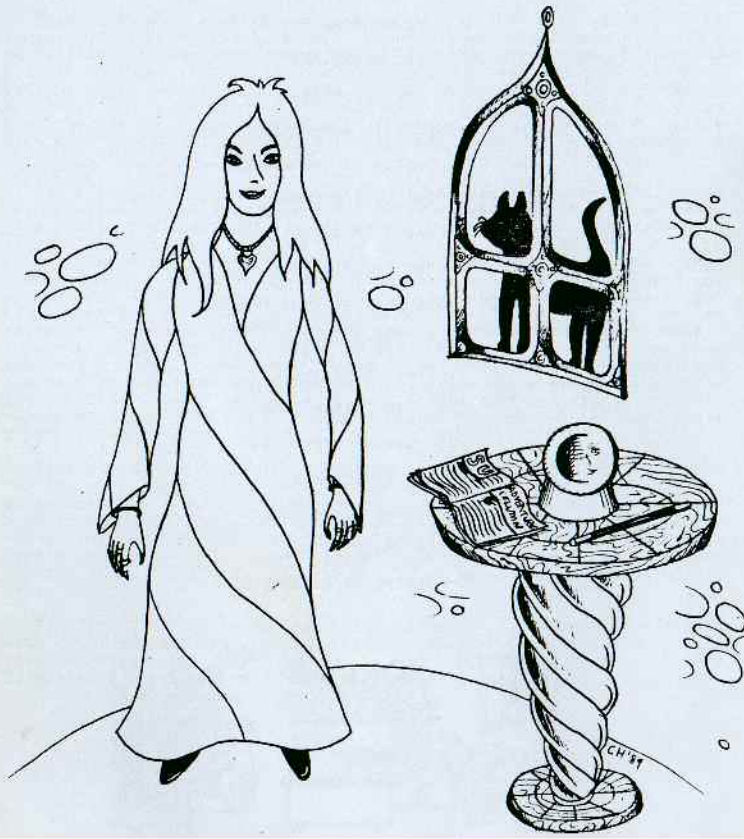
After a flurry of books from Usborne, Duckworth and the like, support for books explaining how to create adventure games in the mainstream media started to dwindle. In response, **Chris Hester** produced *Adventure Coder*, a fanzine that aimed to regalanvise the art of adventure writing and programming.

Chris Hester's targets for *Adventure Coder* magazine were ambitious. He aimed to deliver a holistic approach for budding adventurer creators to realise their ambitions. The fanzine covered a wide range of topics including ideas for plot writing, puzzle construction, reviews as well as comprehensive coding tips for *The Quill*, *PAWS*, *STAC* and adventure engines in Assembly Language.

Was your first machine a Commodore 64?

[Chris Hester] I had a Sinclair ZX80 then a Spectrum 48K, I loved it! Later I progressed to the Commodore 64. I had one of those 1541 disk

ADVENTURE CODER
October '89 Issue 4 £1



adventure CODER



drives and wrote a whole album of synth music in Electrosound, which had just 3 tracks!

What are your first adventure playing memories?

There was a game with a magazine which was very easy to complete. I loved the challenge, so went looking for more.

What games did you enjoy playing?

I can't remember now, though I played a variety, from *Sherlock* to *The Hobbit*. I did prefer text-only games at first.

You started writing in BASIC, what kind of games did you code?

I didn't code adventure games in BASIC, I used *The Quill* and *The Illustrator*. I used BASIC for general programs and soon learnt the joys of machine code!

So *The Quill* changed your adventuring life, both as a player and as an adventure creator?

It was a superb program that let people like me code easily. A golden age of adventuring was under way, and of course there were many other programs you could use.

Did you write many early adventures, both *Quilled* and *non-Quilled*? Can you remember them?

I think I only wrote two games: *Shimmerkin* on the Speccy, which had two versions. One with just *The Quill*, where I was proud to add graphics in tiny squares, just using shapes and colours! I then redid it using *The Illustrator*, though it wasn't quite the same. The graphics were then full-screen if I recall.

My other game was *Runaway* on the [Commodore], which got published by [Commodore Disk User] on their floppy disk!

After *The Quill*, you progressed to *GAC* it seems from the fanzine, why not *PAWS*? What did you think of Sean Ellis' tool?

I don't know, it was a long time ago, but *GAC* was superb, another joy to work with. I did start a third adventure game but scrapped it.

Seemed you were a programmer by trade, did this site of adventuring appeal more to you, or was it more the design?

I only started programming at work much later, when PCs came in and websites. We weren't allowed to use MySQL, so I had to code everything like databases from scratch using PHP!

What was the catalyst behind of *Adventure Coder*, where and when did the idea occur – seemed to be you and a group of enthusiasts with varied skills? How did you all get together?

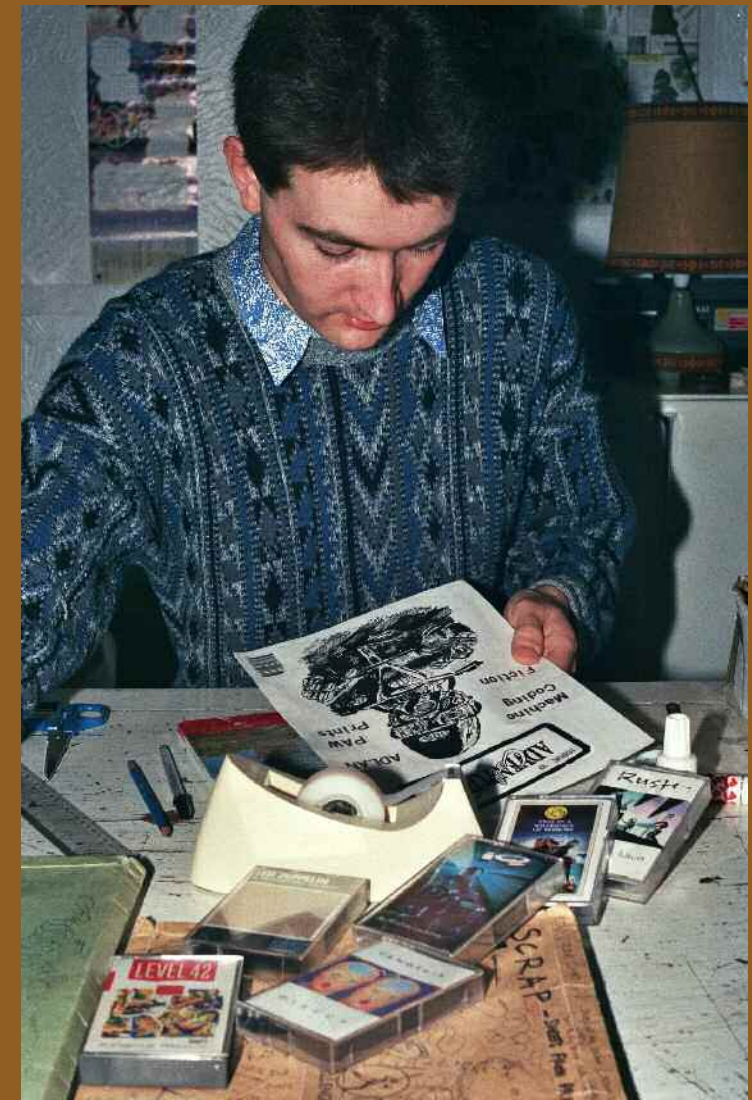
There was a small group of us who worked independently, doing a series of magazines - *Adventure Probe*, *Coder* and so on. I can't remember how I started *Coder*, but it seemed like there was a gap in the market - *Probe* was for playing games. I worked alone to edit and design it, then Mandy Rodrigues published it.

Did you read many other fanzines at the time?

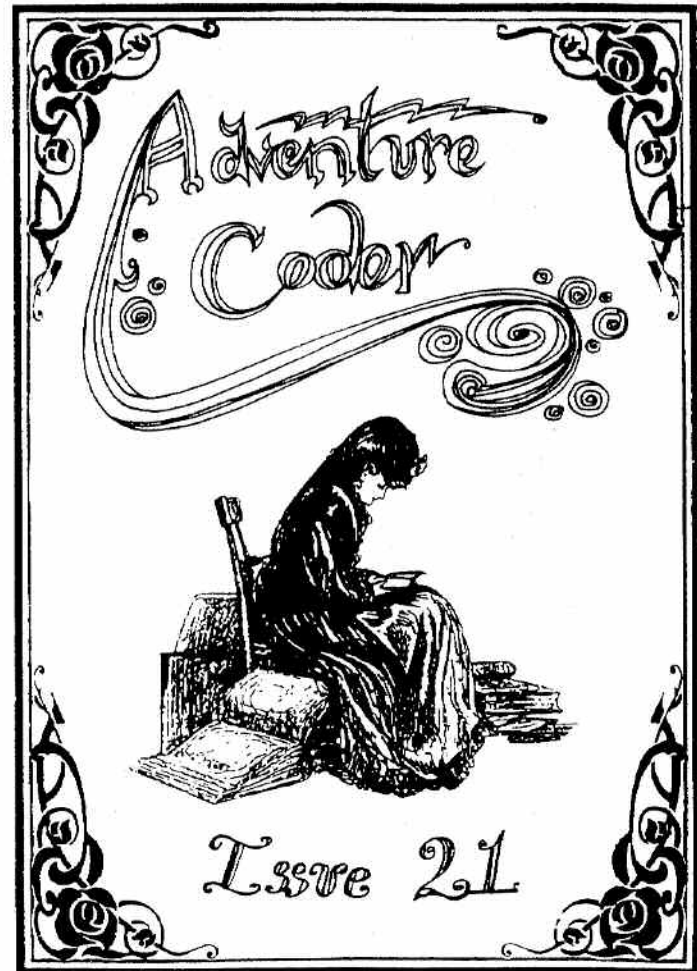
Only ones like *Probe*. They were costly to produce and to buy back then, though we tried to be good value!

It was a unique take on a fanzine, offering a range of services from

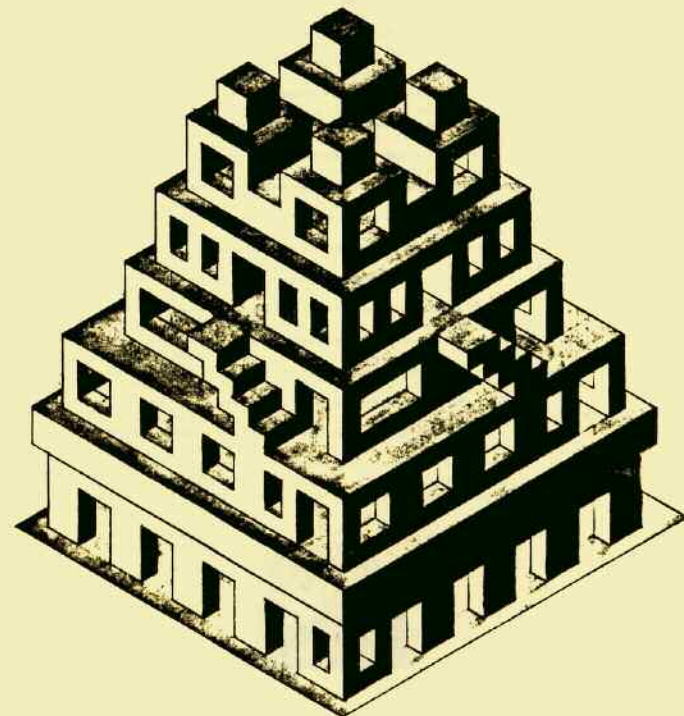
[Above] Chris Hester [and a selection of 80s pop cassettes] poses for the camera during the editing process of *Adventure Coder*.



[Above] Chris Hester [and a selection of 80s pop cassettes] poses for the camera during the editing process of *Adventure Coder*.

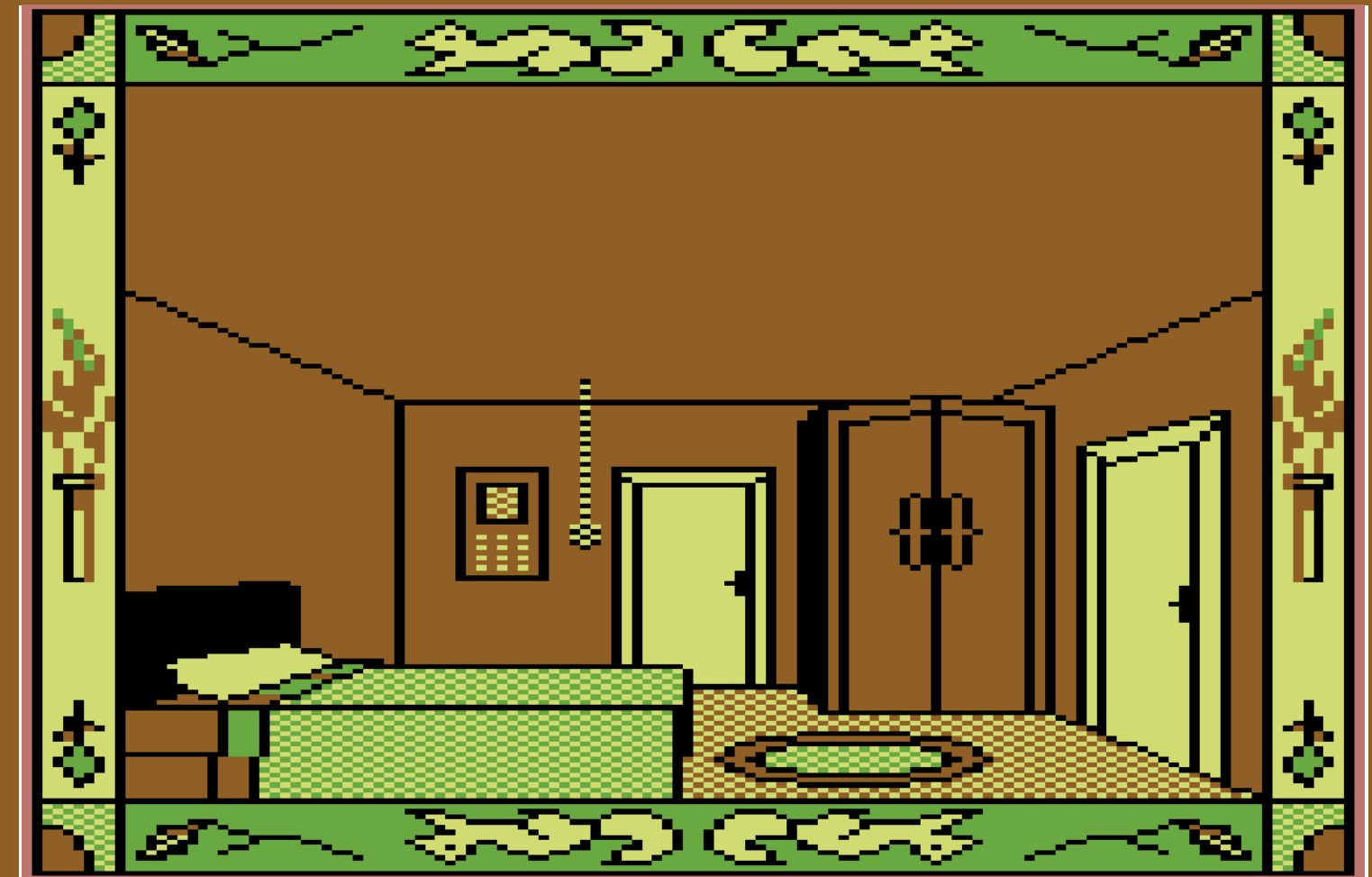
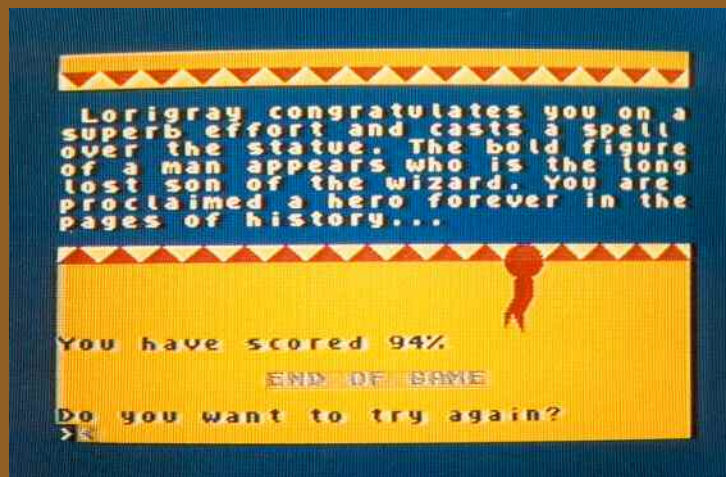
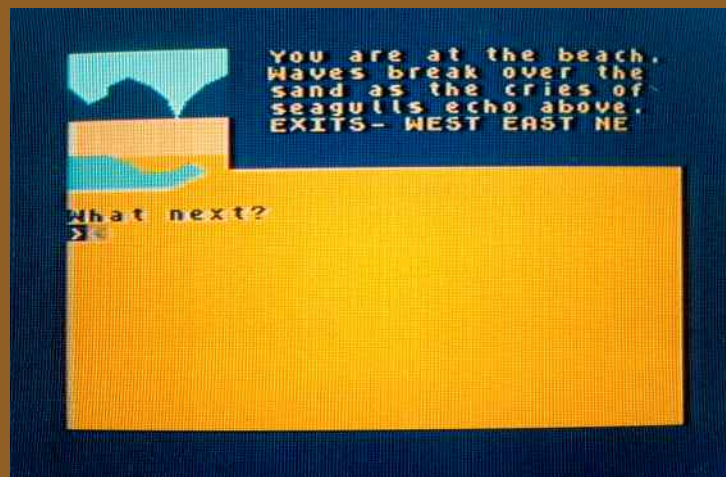
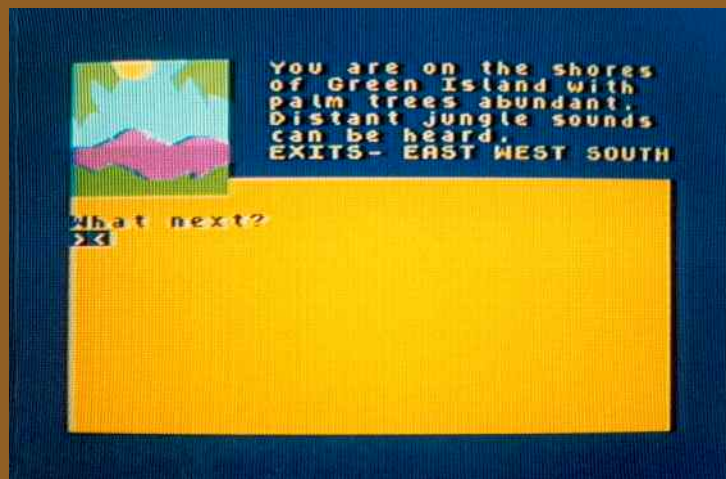
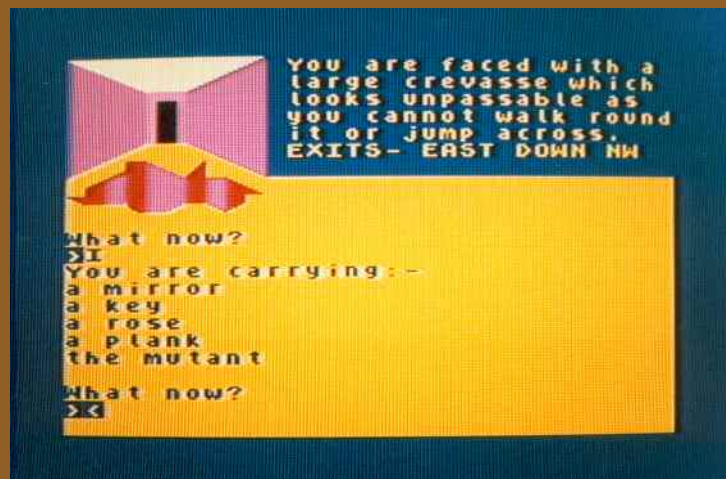
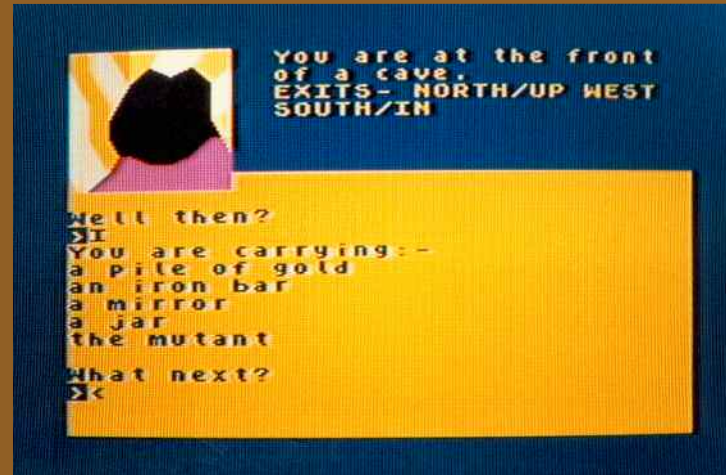


Adventure Coder
AUGUST 1989 ISSUE 2 £1



SHIMMERKIN

Shimmerkin is an adventure written by Adventure Coder editor Chris Hester. Created using Gilsoft's *The Quill*, Chris developed three versions of the game - the first a straight text-only affair, and the second [screenshots below] employed an ingenious method of redefining the ZX Spectrum character set to create the minimalist, but effective and charming graphics in the game. The third version utilised *The Illustrator* and introduced a series of full-screen images. Unfortunately for us, the graphical versions of the game are lost, but the text-only variant can be downloaded and played from sites such as World of Spectrum and Spectrum Computing.



[Above] *Runaway* on the Commodore 64 was authored by Chris using *GAC* to enhance the game with a good spread of location graphics.

writing games, to getting them published. How varied were the responses into the magazine?

I got letters and subscriptions from all over the world! People all had their own way to express themselves, which was great. The many articles I published showed how enthusiastic everyone was.

I love the community feel about it - Did you live up to the ambitions you had for it?

Yeah, I think so. It was a big success. If I helped someone out when writing a game, with coding or with ideas, then it'll have been worth it.

Did you ever manage to get games published by you, or the team, or a collaboration? It struck me to offer the perfect solution of bringing these skills together - Gareth Pitchford, interviewed elsewhere had lots of ideas for adventures, but needed a programmer ... so he paired with Scott Denyer.

No, a lot of us were bedroom coders, working alone.

Did you have a favourite feature?

The Letters Page was always fun to compile and design.

Who did the cover artwork?

I got some great work from readers, or I would do them myself. A lot of the artwork inside that filled gaps was done by me. I couldn't resist!

How long did an issue take to produce? How difficult was it using the technology of the day?

It took a while as there was no desktop publishing software back then. Everything had to be printed out, cut out and pasted onto sheets of A4! Magic Tape was used to hide the edges. These pages were then reduced by half in size when they got printed.

How many issues did it run for? You didn't edit until the end, why did you leave?

24. There wasn't enough material to carry on, so I left it in the safe

PAWS FOR THE MOMENT

One of the most anticipated developments of 2018 is the release of the new Sinclair Spectrum Next computer. The Next promises to be an "updated and enhanced version of the ZX Spectrum totally compatible with the original, featuring the major hardware developments of the past many years packed inside a simple (and beautiful) design by the original designer, Rick Dickinson, inspired by his seminal work at Sinclair Research."

To coincide with the new hardware, Tim Gilberts and Stefan Vogt have been meticulously working on two software restoration projects, culminating in the announcement of brand new Next compatible adventure systems. An updated *Professional Adventure Writing System [PAWS]* and *Diseñador de Aventuras AD [Adventure Designer AD or DAAD]* should be available at the time of release.

To encourage new adventures to be created with both utilities Chris has kindly undertaken the task of scanning each issue that contains *PAWS* articles and has uploaded them to his Flickr account.

```
PAW Prints

Well, here I am again with a few bits and bobs to get your PAWed games
looking great (even if I do say so myself, well nobody else's gonna say
it!), so I'll start this month off with a few routines for enabling the
player to begin the second, or more parts of a multi-part game, using a
password instead of needing to re-load any saved data from the end of the
previous part!
For which we'll need a few system messages, a 'normal' message, and a
new process selected, we'll also need to change the text of location 0
to read something along the lines of, for example..

'In order to pass into part 2, you must please give me the last 3 words
from the second sentence, of the third paragraph, of the end screen of
part 1 of Spud the Elf!'

And for those 3 sysmessages, how about for sys '55' = 'Okay! The passwords
are correct!', for sys '56' = 'Which words?', and for sys '57' = 'What
next?'. Please notice that I've newlined sysmessages 55 and 57 first, by
pressing extend mode, the number 7, and then the delete key, before
inserting any text!
And for that single message, number 'A' = 'Sorry, but those passwords
are incorrect, please try again!'
So for process 1 (which takes care of any actions needed, BEFORE the
player is allowed to take a turn), to turn the prompt on-screen in room
0 into a specific question, relating to the passwords..

* _ AT 0 PROMPT 55

And for any rooms other than the password screen..

* _ NOTAT 0 PROMPT 57

Now for response (taking care of any player-inputs), we'll need a routine
that takes care of any input by the player, given in room 0 (the
password room), and moves those words into process 7 to be measured..

* * AT 0 PROCESS 7 DONE

And for process 7..

* * 0 NEWLINE

Just to make it look a bit 'cleaner', and for those passwords if correct,
ie. those passwords given that are exactly the same as the last 3 words
from the end of the paragraph asked for in the location text of room 0..

BUT GAVE MOUN2 LP SYSMESS 55 ANYKEY GOTO 1 DESC

You'll never need a newline with an ANYKEY DESC, so I've used an sys
instead! So if the passwords asked for are correctly given by the
player, sys 55 is printed, and the next keytouch sends the player to the
'next', proper location, otherwise, if the player gets the passwords
wrong, then the process moves onto..

__ MESSAGE A DONE

I'm sorry the __ action in process 7 can't be newtexted, to make it
look a bit better as I'd like, but if a NEWTEXT were to be used, then any
combination of letters and/or words used by the player as a password,
which did not match with the real passwords, would get sysmessage 6
printed instead of message A, which looks a bit funny!
```

PAWS was heavily featured in a section called "PAW Prints" in Adventure Coder magazine, and contained many useful and frequently asked for routines within it's pages.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/christopherhester/>

hands of Alec Carswell, who renamed it Adventure Coder II - The Preceptor. I have no idea what happened to it after that!

Do you think not having *The Quill/PAWS* for 16-bits made a difference to the continuation of adventures – though *STAC* was on Amiga/ST?

I guess so, you needed all the favourites across all the platforms. But time had moved on, with the Amstrad and of course the PC.

Did you notice the decline in the genre in the magazine?

Yes, as new games came along which were more about the graphics.

A few issues are available online via archive.org and you've uploaded several high quality scans to your own Flickr account. Any plans on completing the issues available?

I really need to. I have so many other things to scan in, but it would be a shame to leave the Coder archive unfinished. One problem is that I don't have a couple of the issues! If anyone has a spare copy of issues 6 or 16 I'd be so grateful to see them. I can offer a spare copy of 21 and 22 in return...

There's a brand-new Spectrum, the Next, about to be released and a new version of *PAWS* to support EXDOS and NextOS from Tim Gilberts too. Any thoughts on the new machine, and what about a return to adventure coding? Perhaps a special edition Adventure Coder?

I like any attempt to bring back the Speccy. I don't plan to do any new adventures as they take a lot of time. I loved playing some of my favourite 8-bit games again on the PC a good few years ago, when I downloaded an emulator that worked just like the real thing.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Chris Hester is the latest casualty of the adventuring high seas, alone on a desert island with a ZX Spectrum and five games to keep his sanity.

Time Thief
The Hobbit
Hitchhiker's Guide
My own games - Shimmerkin and Runaway

AURAL ADVENTURES

In the heady days of 80s home computers no subject matter that was off limits, no game tie-in or theme was out of bounds, too ridiculous or risqué. If an author had a passion or interest, then they could find an outlet penning a game that indulged it. This creative freedom was a perfect marriage for the eccentric Briton, and up and down the land left-field games featuring lawn mowing, collecting bins, coal-stealing moles and pop musicians appeared.

For some reason, computer games combined with pop music were in abundance, and titles appeared on album cassettes and shelves that featured a wide range of artists. For the uninitiated pop fan, running into a wailing cavalcade of Spectrum audio data pulses at the end of a song, may have come as a bit of a shock. We had Wham and their *Music Box*, Pete Shelley's *XL1*, Frankie going to Hollywood, Tubular Bells from CRL, Italian singing sensation Sabrina, Chris Sievey's *The Biz* and *Flying Trains*, and even Shakin' Stevens got in on the act with his self-titled mazer [bundled with *The Bop Won't Stop* album]. Surprisingly, text adventures were in vogue for some artists, and The Strangers, The Beatles and The Thompson Twins appeared in games dedicated to them.

Aural Quest [1985] was designed by The Strangers' keyboard player Dave Greenfield with help from his wife Pam. "In an era where ownership of personal computers was blossoming, keen gamer Dave [...] suggested that the cassette of the album could include a Strangers related computer game as an extra 'track'" explains the group's official website. It was programmed by Mike Turner [who designed games under the Star Dreams banner] creator of other adventures including *Ice Station Zero* [published by Mike White's 8th Day Software] and *The Sandman Cometh* all authored using *The Quill*. A ZX Spectrum exclusive, *Aural Quest* was put as a bonus on the second side of special cassette edition of The Strangers' eighth music album, *Aural Sculpture*. Dave explained: "The programming of *Aural Quest* was left to our friend, Tops. It was done on an adventure writing program on the Spectrum. However, Pam and I designed the strategy and scenario of the game."

The Greenfield's game cast you in the role of the Strangler's tour manager, entrusted by CBS Records to travel the world collecting promoter revenues for the band. There's a secondary mission too, where you have to collect four parts of an ear statue [from the album title and artwork] to use as part of the act and return them all to your London base. After you've found the way to get down from a stepladder in the opening scene [you're phoned whilst decorating] there's some neat puzzling [a language phrasebook required if you



[Above] Hints at further Thompson Twins adventures from Quicksilva and C&VG were never fulfilled.

are to understand any interactions with Johnny Foreigner on your journey for example) as you jet-set around the world visiting Nice, New York, Stockholm, Tokyo and Brisbane. *Quest* has a decent enough plot and is a decent sized game, given that you'd expect little time and resource to be sunk into developing a little folly like this.

Whereas *Aural Quest* was fully authorised with the co-operation of the band, its suffixed-namesake *Beatle Quest*, written by Garry Marsh wasn't – or wasn't fully licenced, and duly received a letter from Apple Corp threatening litigation if its availability for sale continued. It's a pity, as Garry's game and packaging were worthy of an official tie-in. *Beatle Quest* was shipped in an oversized box, with some beautifully drawn Beatles Sgt-Pepper-esque artwork courtesy of renowned British psychedelic graphic artist and illustrator Alan Aldridge. It was developed using an early edition of *The Quill*, and was updated sometime during the development process to a later version [introducing several flag bugs] to include graphics courtesy of *The Illustrator*. Garry was interviewed by adventure antiquarian John Aycock in December 2017 explaining the origins of the plot: "I had wanted to write a play based on the Beatles double White album, back in 1973, and had a few ideas for characters, etc. I drew it out, mapped it, and then added lyrical clues as I went along."

Marsh was [and still is] a Beatles super-fan, meaning that a deep knowledge of the songs and lyrics were usually required in order to work out what was going on and how to proceed in the game. It was a positive, adding to the delight of the game, but also a negative, perhaps turning off players who didn't get very far because they didn't have the required knowledge of the fab four. *Quest* received releases for the C64 and ZX Spectrum, and though 500 copies were sold according to Garry, it remains one of the rarest - and expensive to acquire - games ever. At the time of writing, two signed versions probably from the author's personal collection are currently hanging around internet auction sites with prices upwards of £400. What a pity the planned sequels, *A Day in the Life* and *Across The Universe* never materialised further than a few notes and ideas in Garry's head.

The final track on the adventure album is *The Thompson Twins Adventure*, penned by David Shea [ZX Spectrum - his only adventure it seems] and Fred Preston [Commodore 64] for the British new wave band in October 1984. It was published in a deal between Quicksilva and Computer and Videogames Magazine [C&VG] and came fastened to the front cover of Issue 36 in the form of a phonographic flexi-disc. With the limited capacity of single-sided vinyl discs [around 4.5 minutes], the bundled adventure was for ZX Spectrum owners only, with poor Commodore owners having to send away for their version.

"After a meeting with the Twin's management team we set about choosing a song which would fit in with the Adventure idea" recalled C&VG's Keith Campbell, "[and] after some long and hard deliberation,

a recent hit song Doctor, Doctor was chosen." Quicksilva's Rod Cousens and Mark Eyres steered the development of a proprietary graphic adventure engine, and after putting a prototype of the game in front of the Thompson management for approval the game was given the green light.

The plot followed the Thompson Twins exploring an island where a maniacal Doctor was devising a mysterious potion. The Twins had to search their way around a beach, forest and caverns to find the Doc's lab and add objects to the potion in order to neutralise it. Freebies like this were a good way of introducing new players to the genre as the disc contained an introduction on how to play, and a specially recorded message from the group containing hints and tips on getting through the game. The adventure itself was pretty simple and straight-forward, so perhaps the biggest challenge was getting the thing to load. Speccy owners were at a slight advantage as they could plug in their record players directly into the computer, but Commodore owners had to undergo a procedure more complicated than brain surgery recording the flex-disc to cassette and then attempting to get it to load. If it failed, the magazine provided a simple 25 step solution that drained hours from your young life adjusting recording levels.

Regardless, it was certainly popular, and hundreds of readers managed to complete the game and telephone the magazine with the correct list of objects for the potion in order to enter a competition to win a VIP ticket to a Twins' gig. "Next time we'll make the adventure a bit more difficult" quipped Campbell, inkling at further collaborations between the adventure author and band. To bolster this, the Spectrum version of the game also hinted that further games were in the pipeline, with an announcement that Quicksilva would be releasing a series with the Thompson Twins. For reasons unknown, this idea was quickly shelved and the message removed from the later Commodore version.



CHARLES CECIL

Best known as the co-founder of Revolution Software, the architect of point-and-click adventures *Lure of the Temptress*, *Beneath a Steel Sky* and the multi-award winning *Broken Sword* series, industry legend Charles Cecil cut his adventuring teeth for Artic Computing writing text adventures for the Sinclair ZX-81.

After a tumultuous upbringing in Africa, Charles' family fled and returned to Britain when he was ten years old. After attending Bedales School in Hampshire he took an interest in mechanical engineering and studied at Manchester University. It's there he met Richard Turner who was heavily into computers and had tinkered with several home micros of the time, specifically disassembling the ZX-81 ROM and publishing his findings.

[Charles] We were both on the 'Special Engineering Programme' – we were, apparently, destined to be the future captains of the car manufacturing industry, and Ford had mapped out our life-long career progressions – and company cars. The problem was that the car industry was in a dire state at that time and writing computer games was much more exciting. I do feel privileged and very lucky to have been given the opportunity to enter the computer games industry right at its very inception.

That excitement was fuelled by Richard's TRS-80 computer and the stack of Scott Adams' text adventures that were available for the machine. Charles and Richard were joined by fellow student Chris Thornton who began to teach them both how to code.

[Charles] We played the Scott Adams adventures and an early simulation game called, I believe, Empire. I learned to program in BASIC at Ford, and then Tony Warriner [who joined Charles in 1986 after coding Amstrad game Obsidian for publication] taught me the rudiments of Z80.

Turner was ambitious and moved to Hull to setup a new videogame publishing company alongside Chris. They started to develop Chess and Arcade games for the ZX81 and called themselves Artic Computing.

[Charles] Artic was an acronym of the founders' initials: Richard Ian Turner, Chris A Thornton - I don't remember whether I arrived after the name had been chosen but my name also fitted: Charles Anthony Cecil.

Artic after the initial raft of games releases Charles joined Artic, helping to market the company and design their corporate logo.

[Charles] Yes. A really, really bad drawing. Although frankly the name Artic was pretty rubbish.

In 1981 text adventures from UK software houses on home micros were virtually non-existent, aside from *Colossal Caves* on mainframe systems and the Scott Adams' adventures if you were lucky enough to own a TRS-80. Pioneer John Jones-Steele and Abersoft released *Adventure I* in the following year, and Artic [who noted that Adams'



games had been successful in the US) followed suit with *Adventure A* written and coded by Turner and Thornton.

Adventure A, better known as *Planet of Death* was a mix of BASIC and machine code had a story that followed a stranded player on an alien planet. The only escape was to find their captured spaceship and blast off into freedom. It was an exceptionally short game, with only 20 locations, but did include a decent sized vocabulary.

[Charles] I didn't know Abersoft. After *Adventure A* [Richard] invited me to write *Adventure B* which he would then code – and the rest is history.

Cecil's *Adventure B*, or *Inca Curse* was a good old fashioned treasure hunt, much in the same vein as *Colossal Caves*, with the game borrowing several set pieces and design ideas from the original. Released in 1982 on the ZX-81 it used the framework that Turner had devised for *Planet of Death*, expanding it with a save routine, more locations and objects to give the adventure greater depth.

[Charles] Richard had written an engine for his *Adventure A*, [so] I drew the map on graph paper and marked the items found in specific locations, and then wrote out the potential combinations. It was relatively quick for Richard to then code it.

The games used a verb / noun parser system, so I also listed similar verbs and similar nouns. The problem was that my spelling was terrible, and his wasn't much better. So my spelling of chisel as 'chizel', can't as 'cant' got through to the final game, much to the consternation of fans. I remember one young man coming up to me and saying that his missus had let him buy a ZX81 on the basis that their son would use it as an educational tool – which was fine until she saw how badly spelled my adventures were and she had seen through his ruse.

Set in the remote depths of the South American Jungle, raiding an undisturbed Inca Temple for its treasure, the plot could almost have been lifted from the films of a famous archaeologist. Though Charles would go onto gain a reputation for meticulous research in his later point-and-click adventures, it wasn't quite the case with *Inca Curse*.

[Charles] I'm afraid [not]. When Richard invited me to write a text adventure, I had just watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and had been blown away. So it seemed like a great theme around which to base a game.

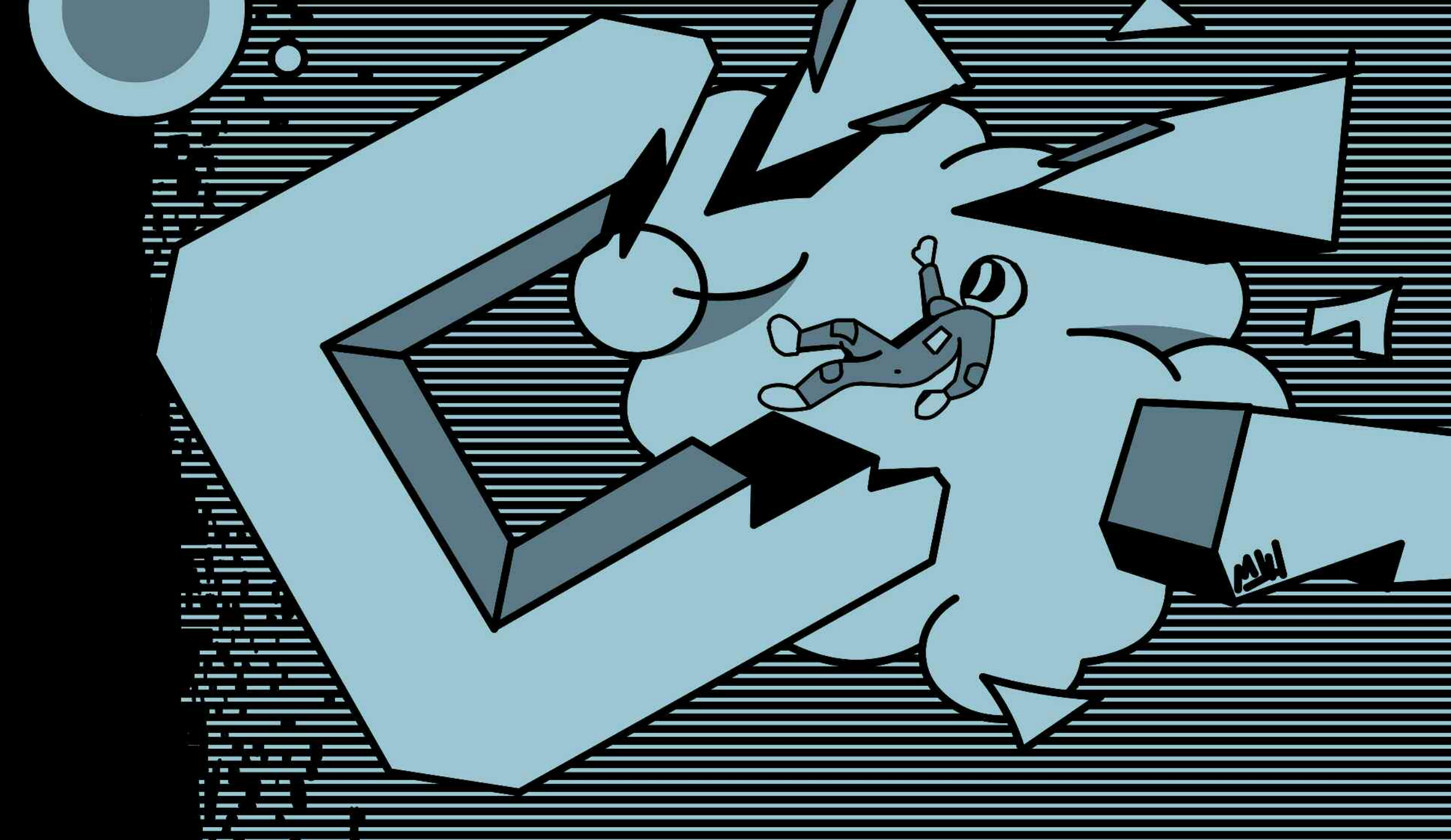
Playing *Adventures A* and *B* today remains rather uninspiring, with their limited prose [all of the locations were for example "I AM IN THE ..."] and vocabulary. Nevertheless they remain a testament to the ambition of Charles and Richard attempting to cram an adventure into 16K of RAM.

[Charles] It was all new. It was an amazing medium. The ZX81 had 1K of memory – but its power and memory was the same as the computers that landed Apollo 11 on the moon. I really didn't know any better.

They did however demonstrate the naivety of the industry of the time that clones would give homage to their inspirations in some shape or form. With elements such as the treasure hunt, the obligatory maze and collapsing temple it could have been assumed that the naming convention was in homage to the original *Adventure*.

[Charles] I think that you are giving us way too much credit. The first one was called *Adventure A* because it was the first. Then *Adventure B* because, well, it was the second. It became clearly pretty quickly that this naming convention was not hugely marketing-friendly. So we retrospectively sexed up the name and the packaging – adding the tag-line *Inca Curse*.

Cecil told Shaun McClure in 2018, that "the game [was] about gathering treasure in a pyramid, whilst having to avoid booby traps. We limited the number of items that a player could carry, and assigned a value to each piece - and once the player passes a certain point, counted down their moves before they were killed. From this,



we calculated the maximum value that could be taken from the pyramid."

Artic and Cecil updated the adventure for the newly released ZX Spectrum, delivering a slightly more verbose game for Sinclair's latest machine with additional prose, and better responses to commands such as the examining of objects. He began to gain feedback from players and discovered that players were using different and hitherto unknown strategies to "subvert" the game in order to collect more treasure than he had calculated possible as the game's designer.

[Charles] We did get letters, and also [had] the privilege of meeting people at Microfairs. I think that it was Richard who had heard of the ploy that people had discovered. I had designed a trigger point after which there were a limited number of moves before the player needed to have escaped the cave. I had planned that people would realise where the trigger point was, gather the most valuable treasure

items, and escape. What I hadn't bargained on was that some people would realise that they could drop treasure just before the trigger point, and get two lots of treasure out in time. So our packaging gave the maximum treasure value that we thought that players could escape with – and people took delight in telling us that they had subverted the game and beaten that maximum score.

Leaving the jungle behind, Charles started work on *Adventure C*, or *The Ship of Doom* – a classic science-fiction romp that took the atmosphere, puzzles and game design from *Inca Curse* and blasted it into space.

[Charles] *Adventure B* had sold well – the university summer holiday was coming around, so I agreed to write another. I would work with Richard at weekends, and find pubs in the evening that had a Space Invaders table - but during the week I would be working at various Ford production plants. I don't remember if I sneaked in my design while at work, or in the evenings.

The player was hostage aboard an alien cruiser [thus the original working title of *Alien Spaceship* on the ZX-81] battling their way to the ship's control room in order to find the mechanism that would release their ship from the fiendish Gravitron Beam and enable their escape. It was an obvious addition to the Artic catalogue and suggested a continuation of subject matter to their adventures.

[Charles] Of course a sci-fi movie had been released a few years earlier which absolutely blew away the audiences of 1977 – including a 15 year old me. [...] I would love to say that I was seeking a set of themes – but it would be a fib.

Once again Richard enhanced the Artic adventure engine, squeezing more locations and objects into a meagre 13K. Having worked hard to increase the vocabulary in each iteration of his games, Charles ended up getting into trouble when he included several subversive and expletive commands. *The Ship of Doom* notoriously provoked the ire of the media and politicians.



[Above] A screenshot from Incentive Software's GAC re-authored version of Charles Cecil's *Ship of Doom*.

[Charles] People playing our adventures would get very frustrated if the computer didn't understand the verb/noun that seemed rational to them. So I included the ability to use the work 'fuck' (and its derivatives) – so if someone typed in 'fuck' in frustration, then it would understand and respond accordingly. It was puerile and ill-judged. My only defence was that it was 1982, and I was 18.

Phil Garrett of Sinclair User hinted at the "distinctly X-rated Android I would like to meet", who could be found within the "Android Pleasure Room" and interacted with by using the aforementioned f-word. It wasn't required to complete the game, nor was relevant to the plot, but merely a vehicle for Charles to inject some humour into the game. Interestingly, the game returned one of several random responses: THAT WAS SATISFYING ... BUT GOT YOU NOWHERE, SHE SAYS: PERHAPS YOU SHOULD TAKE A COURSE IN ANDROID ANATOMY, SHE POINTS OUT THAT PERHAPS YOU WOULD BE MORE SUCCESSFUL USING A SCREWDRIVER and SHE MOANS VIOLENTLY AND BLOWS A FUSE.

It was all good fun, but the mob armed themselves with pitchforks because of the inclusion of a harsher, and non-consensual synonym of the expletive that was included in the dictionary. Richard Turner told Retro Gamer magazine "A mother had complained to her MP that she had caught her son typing in expletives which it responded to." Charles recalled to industry trade journal MCV "That was okay, until I got busted by The Sun. [...] I remember they ran the piece at the bottom of page three [with the headline 'Computer Game Nasty Zapped by The Sun'], which felt ironic really."

The outrage escalated to the British Parliament, and Artic and *Adventure C* was a target for moral entrepreneur Mary Whitehouse and her National Viewers and Listeners Association who "felt the permissiveness of the media was having an adverse influence on young minds." MP Graham Bright, whose Private Member's Bill became the Video Recordings Act (1984) was pressured to include videogames as part of the legislation. Charles, with relief, told MCV "If video games had been included in that act at the time, I would have been an extremely unpopular person."

The final word of common sense was written by Paul Rose [aka Mr Biffo, editor of the Teletext-based video games magazine Digitiser] who said in 2015 "there was probably no way of discovering this other than trying it out, so [I] can't help but feel the onus should be as much on the players and reviewers as the developer."

At the very least *Ship of Doom* demonstrated Cecil's evolving skill and bravery as a storyteller, his willingness to inject elements of comedy, exploratory gameplay, the inclusion of Easter Eggs [an in-game advertisement] and his efforts to further adventure technology

by adding a random non-playable character that appeared during the game.

[Charles] Either that – or absolute proof that we were making it up as we went along. I would go for the latter.

His final text adventure [sadly, he would never return to the genre] was *Adventure D*, better know as *Espionage Island*. It was James Bond-esque, having the player sent on a reconnaissance mission to observe an enemy island. All doesn't go to plan, and the piloted aircraft is soon under fire from the enemy and taking damage. With a stricken engine, it begins to plummet towards the Atlantic leaving the erstwhile spy to bail out safely [easier said, than done] make it ashore, avoid capture and discover the secrets of the island installation.

[Charles] When I left University in 1985, I came to work for Artic, full time and Richard moved across to run his burgeoning kitchen design business, later to be called Articaad. Companies like US Gold, and Ocean were much more business-savvy than us – and well-funded American companies like Activision were emerging. The golden era was well and truly over for the bedroom coding companies.

Artic continued with its alphabetical text adventures after Charles left the company. They were *Adventure E: Golden Apple* [written by Simon Wadsworth in 1984], *Adventure F: Eye of Bain* [written by Simon Wadsworth in 1984], *Adventure G: Ground Zero* [written by Colin Smith using *The Quill* in 1984], and *Adventure H: Robin Hood* [written by Nigel McGhee using *The Quill* and *The Illustrator* in 1985].

For its other non-alphabetical adventure titles, *Dead at the Controls* remains unreleased, and *Curse of the Seven Faces* and *Kingdom of Speldome* were published via licence with Tynesoft and Imperial Software.

[Charles] The remaining adventures were published, but I had nothing to do with them and remember very little about them. [...] We were being overwhelmed – I remember, in particular, playing a cover mount demo of *Impossible Mission* and realising that we were so, so far behind in terms of production values. Our last gasp salvation came when Geoff Brown phoned and asked us to adapt our 1981 *World Cup Soccer* for their Mexico '86 – World Cup game. By 1987 we bowed to the inevitable and closed down Artic. I set up a conversion house, Paragon Programming, which worked for US Gold, and Richard focussed on Articaad.

Charles was hired by US Gold, and then moved to Activision away from hands-on development. Adventures were on the back burner, but he returned to the narrative genre when he formed Revolution Software with Artic stalwart Tony Warriner, David Sykes and Noirin Carmody in 1990.

Cecil became Revolution's Managing Director, and was heavily involved in writing and designing the firm's games. They went on to develop a string of commercially acclaimed point-and-click adventures including *Lure of the Temptress*, *Beneath a Steel Sky* and the award-winning *Broken Sword* series.

Of note is Charles decision to support a fledgling internet-based set of hobbyist programmers working on an engine to play old adventure games. In the early 2000s Charles handed the ScummVM team source code to *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky*, bringing the genre back into the public consciousness and attracting a brand new audience. He told Arts Technica that the decision to support the ScummVM project "was, in retrospect, smart—many millions of players who would not otherwise have got to know the games have subsequently played them. Successes of Revolution's remastered series, and new endeavours with the *Broken Sword* series can be partially attributed to the project audience."

Charles Cecil, a true industry legend was awarded an MBE in 2011 for services to video gaming and could be cast in one of his own adventures, perhaps *Inca Curse*, as a priceless, high scoring bona fide British adventure gaming treasure.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Escaping his own *Ship of Doom*, adventure legend Charles Cecil abandons his ill-fated ship and swims ashore our desert island, able to save just five text adventures to pass the time.

Scott Adams's *Adventure* - maybe *Adventureland*
Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy - Infocom
Blood and Laurels - Emily Short
Around the World in 80 days - Meg Jayanth
Façade - Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern

MARK CANTRELL

Bitten by the computer bug after his Dad brought home a ZX Spectrum, Adventure guru **Mark Cantrell** forged a reputation for first-class adventures and recognition as one of the most accomplished and innovative *PAWS* programmers around.

It was Christmas 1984 when Mark Cantrell received an early surprise present, a ZX Spectrum 48K from his beloved father. It opened a world of creativity and game playing to a boy eager to explore new technology.

[Mark Cantrell] Computers weren't really on my radar at the time. [...] I'd never asked for a ZX Spectrum, or any other kind of computer, and I have no idea what prompted my Dad to get one. [...] I dived into the computer mags and become an avid reader of *Crash and Your Spectrum*. [...] Then the whole world of games grabbed me.

His favourites were *Dragontorc*, *Atic Attack*, *Knightlore*, *Tir Na Nog*, *Exolon* and *Lords of Midnight*. For someone developing an interest in creative writing and storytelling, Mike Singleton's fantasy role-playing epic [packaged with an expansive novella] intrigued Cantrell more than the others, and he found the sense



of scale and atmosphere intoxicating.

[.] It really proved life changing. Obviously I wasn't aware of this at the time, but if my Dad hadn't turned up with that little black box, and if I hadn't then got into adventure games, then I honestly doubt I would have gone on to become a journalist and a published novelist. So I guess I could say that the Speccy played midwife to my creative writing.

As games swilled between Mark and his friends, several adventure titles, along with *Lords of Midnight* were amongst the titles that fell into his lap - he realised they were an obvious medium for his talents.

I do enjoy writing, creating stories, characters, world building and all the rest. I've always had a creative streak, but as I said I can't draw or paint, and I've never been musically inclined. Words, it turned out, were my thing. It wasn't until I'd written a few short stories that I came to realise that adventure games were essentially my first foray into creative writing; now, here I am with a couple of published novels under my belt.

Aged 16 he designed *The Gods of War* with school friend Ted King. It was a first attempt at an adventure and they initially prototyped a basic version of the game using Gilsoft's *The Quill* in 1985. Putting his writing passion to good use, Cantrell gave *Gods* an expansive backstory to an intriguing game set in post-nuclear holocaust Britain

where north was pitched against south and the doomsday population battled each other for survival.

I can't remember how it came about, but [Ted and I] doubled up on the design and game plan. The concept was largely there already, [and] there wasn't much to [the prototype], but when *GAC* came out I revisited the concept and the design.

Though he loved *GAC* and felt it was powerful, easy to use and was a great tool for creating adventures it did come with several restrictive caveats. To get around them, Mark dabbled with creating his own adventure system and did cobble together a primitive three-word parser using Z80 assembler.

I abandoned the project with my sanity more or less intact [and then] Gilsoft released the Professional Adventure Writer, and I became a variant of a certain meme that I see cropping up everywhere. You know, *PAWS* is walking along the street minding its own business, I am turning my head its way to gaze in adoration, and poor *GAC* is looking aghast and upset at fickle me. *PAWS* completely turned my head, I have to say.

GAC was a great tool, but *PAWS* bewitched me. There were things I could do on *PAWS* that I couldn't on *GAC*. I also found *PAWS* easier to learn and use. Maybe that was because I'd had an earlier exposure to *The Quill*, so was rather more familiar with Gilsoft's framework, whereas with *GAC* I was getting to grips with something entirely

new. Then there is the purely subjective aesthetic aspect in the way the two systems presented their game screens. I just found I preferred the way *PAWS* did things.

Gods tapped into the hightening superpower cold war tensions of the early 80s, with a little dash of satire thrown in for good measure. Technology was interpreted by the survivors as god-like, so missile systems became deities and Mark bundled a hand drawn map with the game that poked fun at some well known landmarks - Greenham Common became the "High Temple of the Gods" and Scotland was completely obliterated indicating that the nuclear explosion occurred north of the border.

Yeah, sorry Scotland, it was really nothing personal and I did feel bad about it afterwards. Actually, I didn't envision Scotland taking the brunt of the nukes. England and Wales got hit hard too. It was more a case that the far North of the British Isles was locked in glaciers left over from a nuclear winter. By the time of the story, the glaciers were in retreat and more temperate climes had returned but what had been Scotland was still ice-locked. It was a way of setting some limits to help 'self-contain' the game world.

I guess it did draw on the Cold War tensions of the times. Nuclear Armageddon was the big theme bubbling in the background, wasn't it? But I think it was more the cultural expression of this background anxiety rather than the geopolitics of it all. You know, the post-nuclear stories in comics and books and films; I'd say these were of

more influence. Obviously, with the reference to Greenham, real world snippets had their bit to play.

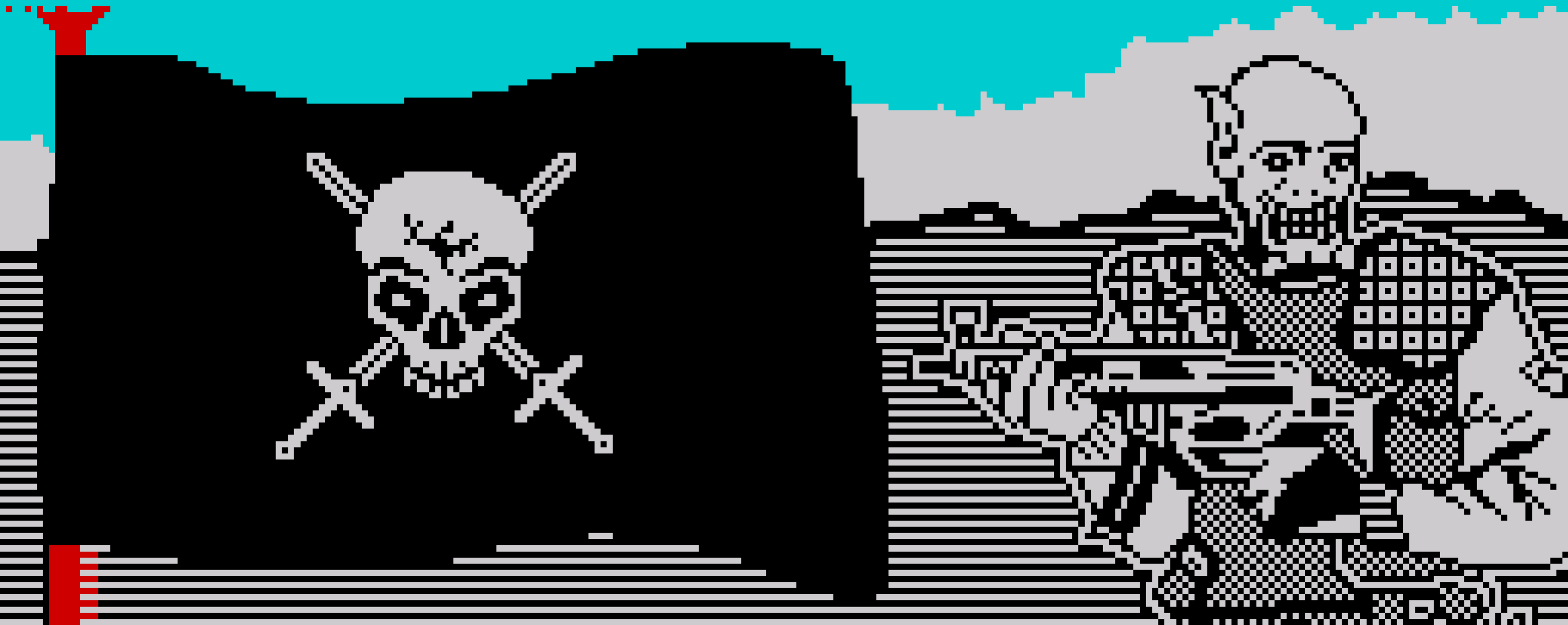
It was a serious issue dealt with in a serious matter. It didn't poke fun at all elements, and coming from two teenagers the writing demonstrated a level of maturity and confronted uncomfortable consequences of radiation such as mutations and living with fallout.

Yeah, I guess it did. Strange to hear the writing described as mature, though - but I'll certainly take the compliment. I mean, I was 16 or 17 when I was working on that game. It really was my first foray into writing, outside of school work.

Gods was self-published in 1997 under the Nebulus Deigns label, an indication that science fiction dominated Mark's imagination. It would be a passion, and "a love of all things space-y" that steered the theme of his future games.

I figured I needed a 'label'. Somehow it didn't seem right to publish under my own name. Maybe I figured they wouldn't be taken seriously otherwise. I wracked my brains and eventually settled on Nebula Designs.

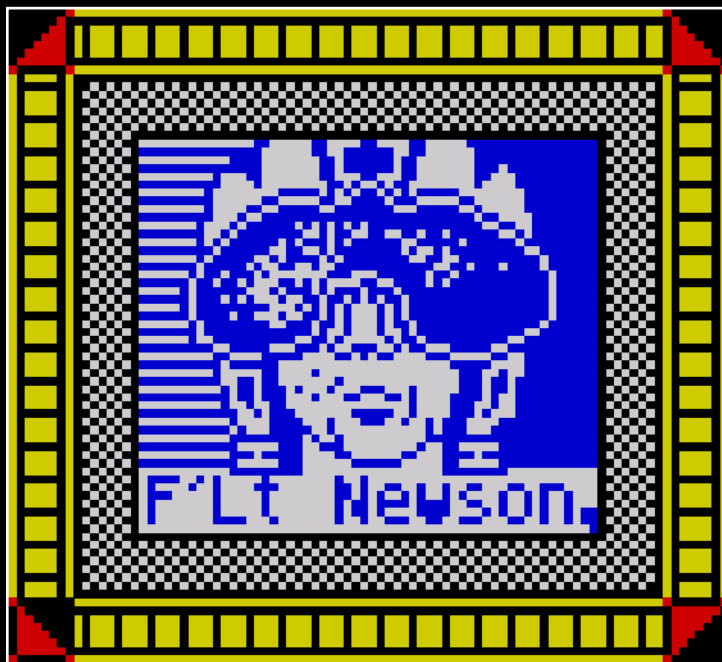
Project Nova arrived in 1987. It started life as another *GAC*-authored game, originally called *Novagen* that was never released, but since has been published on various preservation sites, including World Of Spectrum. Again, Mark re-engineered the earlier version to harness



the power of PAWS, making changes to puzzles, overhauling the graphics and improving the game's aesthetics and usability through a clever use of colours.

There was nothing in particular that sparked this one off, I think. It was probably born out of my general love for science fiction. Then again, you could probably say that about all my games - books too, I bet. The catalyst [to change] was the arrival of PAW itself. I figured I ought to have all my games on the same platform. So naturally, I decided to expand and – hopefully – improve the game in this new version.

Despite the additional parsing facilities offered by PAWS, Mark avoided the overuse of nouns and prepositions in *Gods and Project Nova*. He relied on the tried and trusted VERB NOUN approach, even though adventures such as Magnetic Scrolls' *The Pawn* and other peer titles, especially Infocom adventures looked to showcase



complicated and sophisticated parsing.

I suppose the parsing system was more complex than it needed to be. *Gods of War* didn't really use it that much because it was designed with more limited parsers in mind. It came to the fore more with my later works as I became more familiar with that system.

On the whole, I guess there was an element of showing off – look at what we can do! – whether that was *The Pawn* or me with *Diablo!* Strictly speaking, some of those fancy tricks I pulled weren't necessary for the game. They were just nice to have. That said, PAW's more extensive parsing system did open up possibilities of a more direct relevance for a game. It allowed for more nuance in the handling of objects and settings and the kinds of more practical tricks you could pull off.

Between *Gods* and *Project Nova* Mark's designs evolved, not only as he became a more experienced as a writer, but also in synergy with the technology. From *Gods* to *Nova* to *Diablo!* [which comes later] there was a distinctive change in his approach to adventure writing, and an adept understanding of what made a good text adventure.

Once I had an idea, I started off by writing a rough storyline. I think I then started scribbling notes on the game plan and the likely problems to be solved. Alongside this, I would start to sketch out a rough map of locations, settings, 'plot points' and problems. With this 'rough draft' put together, I'd start to try and translate this into the 'script' for the game. Basically, I created lists of common commands, objects and what-not. As the game developed, I'd add more specific commands that would need to be thrashed out. I wrote out a 'script' of rough location texts and game messages on an A4 pad. The sketched map would be translated onto a gridded location map made

out of A4 sheets glued together. I'd draft out the programming routines on paper, too, and then tweak them as I programmed them into PAWS. I'm not sure how the process evolved after all these years. I guess it became more refined, as I grew more familiar with the elements that were more or less common across all games. A lot of my approach had been thrashed out with GAC, and my earlier experiments with *The Quill*. Obviously, as I got more familiar with PAWS I started pushing to see what it could do, but beyond that I guess the evolution was more a refinement of the approach I took to designing and implementing the games.

What makes a good adventure? I guess a good storyline, a sense of place and character, atmosphere, reasonable problems, and no sudden death. I was probably a little guilty of this latter one myself, especially early on, but I hope I managed to avoid it in my later work. Of course, there's sudden death from misreading the signs and screwing up, and then there's just plain, utterly irritating sudden deaths. As an example, back in the day, I'd played an adventure where a bomb kept cropping up at random. You had to diffuse it [and] the wire you had to cut also changed at random too. I got blown up quite a lot. Unsurprisingly I gave up on the game. This is not the hallmark of a good adventure game; there's no figuring out where you went wrong, it's just pointless pseudo-random annoyance.

From the deep space of *Project Nova* the next game crash landed into a King's courtyard in medieval Britain with *Jester Quest*, another adventure self-published in 1988. *Jester Quest* told the story of Jeremy the Jester, a failed jester and purveyor of dreadful jokes, in danger of being ousted from his job by the great jester of the southern lands, the aptly named Userper. It featured the usual PAWS refinements and a special command, TELL JOKE that armed Jeremy with his ultimate weapon - Christmas Cracker-grade wisecracks. As with *Gods*, writing credits were given to Mark and a second collaborator, this time his younger sister, Louise.

Basically, I challenged her to design an adventure game which she duly did. It was then up to me to translate this into a working adventure game.

Once again there was a beautiful hand-drawn map that accompanied the game, showing trademark fantasy locations such as a Palace, the Prancing Odour Tavern, Dusty Mountains and a stick figure representation of Virgin Group magnate Richard Branson drowning



out to sea.

Yeah, [that was] a tongue-in-cheek doodle on the accompanying map; just a little adolescent humour. Let's see. Virgin had released its Mates brand of condoms. Richard Branson went on an adventure, flying around the world in a balloon, but it went down and they



ditched in the sea somewhere. So, put the two together as a quick doodle on a map... silly humour fit for a *Jester Quest*. Yeah, okay, I'm better at the dystopian stuff.

You couldn't get more dystopian space odyssey than his next game, *Diablo!* in 1988. A game he said "blatantly channelled [Ridley Scott's 1979 science-fiction horror film] *Alien*". A lost spaceship, the ESS Discoverer, is found abandoned and floating through space by a roving starfighter patrol. There's an unknown evil presence on board, and the pilots quickly depart screaming in "cold terror". It's left to Captain Payne and his crew, hired by the Interstellar Shipping Coordinator to board the Discoverer and find out what's happened.

Diablo! stretched the limits of PAWS' powers adding PSIs - pseudo intelligent non-playable characters, and the much admired ability to play the game as more than one protagonist [including a female]. It split the display into four parts - showing a location graphic, location text, the input window and a neat avatar of the team member you were currently directing.

It was my most technically demanding game, that's for sure, although I was surprised at how easily it came together. I'd say it's the adventure I'm proudest of, although *Gods of War* has to give it a run for its money simply because it was my first venture into creating the things.

Diablo! is a wonderful example of sublime programming by Cantrell, making use of sophisticated CondAct routines and harnessing PAWS ability to use customised machine code routines via its EXTERN command.

I expected it to be monstrously hard. I wasn't even sure that PAWS would let me pull it off. I just had a feeling that it work. I was proved right, but I was gobsmacked at how easy it actually proved to be. I think I got lucky. The 'tumbler' seemed to fall into place so there wasn't the degree of hair-tearing, tears and screaming I'd originally anticipated. That's not to say it was all plain sailing, though. But I can't take all of the credit. It was PAWS' parser and processes that made it possible.

Part of the motivation [...] with the fancy routines in *Diablo!* was to challenge a certain snobbery that had come to surround games written on a commercially available utility. There was this notion that consumers deserved better than what these platforms could offer. One company I submitted to even said as much in their rejection letter. That attitude bugged me, because there were scores of great games created using utilities like *The Quill*, *GAC* and *PAWS*. So I wanted to show what a utility written game could actually do. Okay, there was an element of showing off too.

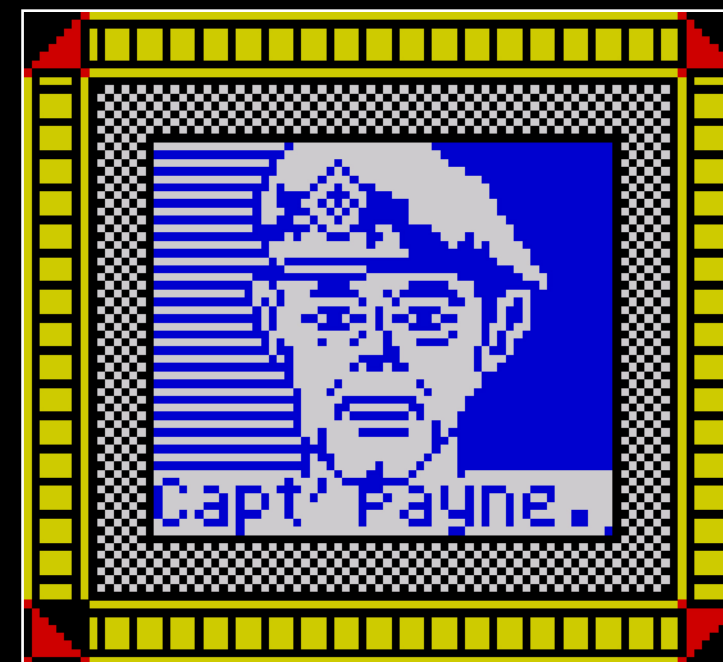
Mark's graphical abilities were also much improved in *Diablo!* It was obvious that his ability to push Spectrum pixels was becoming more proficient, and the illustrations featured in the game are precise, well drawn and detailed, if a little repetitive.

I'm no artist. Sadly, I'd love to be able to draw and paint. But words are my medium, not pictures. I sketched things out, using gridded paper to try and guide how it would appear on screen for the location graphics to avoid that old colour clash problem. For the more intricate graphics, such as the character portraits in *Diablo!* And the characters on the title page of *Gods of War*, I added tracing paper to the mix. Basically, I flicked through comics and magazines for likely 'models', traced it, and then transferred it onto gridded paper to create a basic template. Then I used my limited drawing skills to modify the image. After that, I used a graphic package to create the image for use in the game.

The 128K version showcased *Diablo!*'s programming prowess even further. Mark extended the game with more PSIs, an experimental FOLLOW routine and better interaction between characters with complex RADIO and SAY TO commands.

I think the main casualty in writing the game on the 48K machine was the location texts and messages. I recall they were quite a bit longer on the 128K versions. Oh, I had to cut back on the location graphics too, so there was a lot less locational variety. *Diablo!* was really the first game I designed with the 128K machine explicitly in mind.

It added up to a very polished and rounded product, with the



package including Mark's trademark map, a player's guide and his first "feelie" - an investigation dossier that could be scrawled on as the player progressed through the game.

It was a natural extension of the maps I made for *Gods of War* and *Jester Quest*. I'd got my inspiration for those from games like *Dragonarc*. I liked the sense of atmosphere they helped convey; the suggestion of a world beyond the game. It was something to entice the imagination and draw me in.

The critics loved it. Mike Gerrard, who had ignored Mark's previous adventures for review, did finally feature *Diablo!* in issue 43 of *Your Sinclair* and awarded it a solid 8/10. He praised it's scale, "The 128K version [...] has more features than Level 9 or Magnetic Scrolls games" he said, lavishing more words on its sophisticated programming, noticing that "the ability to switch between characters is great fun". Finally, he heartily recommended the game

commenting that it was “a sheer delight to play”. Phil King in *Crash* magazine was equally resplendent praising “the attention to detail in the presentation” and the exquisite writing, saying “the very tense atmosphere of the game is achieved by some great descriptions, telling how you feel worried about what could be lurking in the shadows.”

You might say it's nice to be noticed. In a sense, it represented a validation and a recognition of the hard work that had gone into the game; I could actually make something worthwhile. As a novelist today, or as a games maker back then, I share a common trait with many an author – a nagging self doubt: Is the game/book any good, am I any good, what makes me think I could generate anything worthwhile? For a fleeting moment you get to cast a smug glance at nagging doubt and watch it squirm.

There's no surprise it was awarded best mail-order adventure of the year by The Adventurer's Club in 1990 and that recognition led directly to all three games being re-published under the GI Games and Zenobi labels.

Having a publisher behind you is a huge difference, whether it was the computer games back then with Zenobi Software, or Inspired Quill with my books today. I'd got a call out of the blue to tell me that *Diablo!* had won Best Mail Order Adventure - which was a pleasant surprise, even if I was a bit bewildered by it. John [Wilson] got in touch to suggest Zenobi release the game, the company had also won an award, best mail order company I believe, so I bundled up all my games and sent them over.

Zenobi's publishing experience and customer list drove the games into the arms of a new audience, but *Diablo!* was the last adventure programming by Mark. It was so impressive, and different to all other PAWEd adventures that had gone before that he was soon inundated with requests to reveal his techniques. In the spirit of the classic British bedroom coder he penned several articles for Gerard at Your Sinclair, and for several 'zines that were around at the time.

By then, I'd discovered my desire to be a journalist and writer, so I'd started looking around for things to write about. The tricks I'd learned with PAWS were an obvious and natural starting point.

The hints and tips articles were amalgamated into a booklet entitled *Process One*. It was an attempt to inject life back into the genre, and in his own words, try to stop it from “ceasing to exist” or to prevent games from being “monotonously uniform.” It coincided with an article he'd written “Adventures - An Endangered Species” in Chris Hester's *Adventure Coder* warning of the writing on the wall for the end of text adventuring.

I created a photocopied, cut and paste home-made booklet for myself. I never did anything with it, really. It was largely produced for myself, just for the sake of it. I sent a copy to John Wilson at Zenobi, which was publishing my games by then. We mulled it over but nothing ever came of it.

In terms of the evolution of the market, if I recall right, I had this vague sense of dismay at the proliferation of movie tie-ins, coin-op conversions and the like. I felt that more original games, not just adventures, were being nudged out. In some respects, I felt that computer games were being absorbed into the marketing and merchandising machinery rather than being allowed to be cultural artefacts in their own right.

PAWS PROCESSING

Process One contains articles, tutorials and example code designed to help PAWS users implement advanced features in their own adventure games. Thanks to Mark and John Wilson, it is now available for download from Gareth Pitchford's website.

<http://www.8bitag.com/archive/process-one.html>



[Above] Smart graphics, atmospheric writing, an intuitive use of colour and cutting-edge programming in Mark Cantrell's *Diablo!*

In today's terms, I guess the metaphor is the proliferation of superhero movies, reboots, remakes, endless franchises and all the rest. Originality, difference, these all still exist, but it feels as if they are being crowded out. Much the same, I think, as it was with computer games generally and adventure games in particular. Now, don't get me wrong. Laments about the wider impact aside, there were plenty of these games I enjoyed. Likewise the movies. But I'd prefer not to lose the spice of variety for the sake of corporate machine culture.

By the time of *Process One*, the 16-bit market was dominant, and without a viable utility [apart from the ST's *STAC*] Cantrell's endangered species was really already extinct.

When I moved on to 16 bit machines, as you say, there was no equivalent of PAWS available. I dabbled with an effort to use *STOS Basic* to try and recreate my adventures, but it didn't last. I'd become more a writer than an adventure game creator, so my ST quickly morphed into a word processor and occasional games-playing machine. The last days of the ZX Spectrum went by pretty much the same way as they began – beyond the edge of my horizons. I'd flick through the magazines in Smiths, out of a combination of curiosity and nostalgia, but I really lost touch with it all.

I guess I'd simply moved on. For one thing, I didn't feel I'd do another game as good as *Diablo!*, at least, not one as technically demanding. It seemed like there was nothing more to be done. For another, my focus had begun to shift towards journalism and creative writing. By 1990 I'd started dabbling in short fiction. I nabbed an idea I'd had for a potential adventure game and turned into my first short story. Actually, in terms of length it was more of a novella. I also started at university that year, so I just found my focus and outlook shifting away from adventures. I never looked back or questioned it. It just felt like that it had reached a natural and satisfying conclusion.

Cantrell has kindly made *Process One* publically downloadable and these examples of exemplar coding combined with the recent release of an updated *DAAD* utility from Stefan Vogt and Tim Gilberts could herald a new renaissance of classic text adventure authoring.

It's nice to now that adventures aren't dead, and that people are still doing things. Will I ever pick up the baton again? Probably not. It's a part of my life that is complete; a source of fond memories and an essential part of my 'origin story' but it's not something I feel inclined to pursue again. There's an old blog post on my website that explores how the Spectrum got me started as a writer. I've recently added some screenshots and links on my site's bibliography page. That era of my life is gone, but it's not forgotten. It's enough for me now to know that people are still out there doing their own thing.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Diablo! author Mark Cantrell takes to the escape pod and jettisons from the stricken research vessel *ESS Discoverer*. Now marooned on a deserted island, he has just five text adventures to help retain his sanity.

Ah, you got me! Um, the waters of memory have evaporated. Let's see. *Bored of the Rings*, I remember that. I thoroughly enjoyed *Delta 4*'s warped humour. *Worm in Paradise*, I found it a challenging game and in truth I wasn't very good at it so maybe now I'm marooned I'll finally crack it. *Mindfighter*, one of the few games I bought on the Atari ST. Its theme of post-nuclear holocaust, and the horrors it depicted appealed. I like the fact it came with a book, too. I guess it reflected something of my own creative journey. Lastly, I guess I'd better have a copy of PAWS to make up number four and five.

TREVOR LEVER & PETER JONES

Trevor Lever and Peter Jones formed one of Britain's most creative adventuring partnerships, exploring the satirical worlds of social mobility, package holidays and organised crime in their trio of games.

Trevor Lever and Peter Jones met by a quirk of fate in 1976 when Trevor began house sharing with an old school-friend of Peter's. During their many trips to various local public houses they hit it off immediately when they discovered many shared interests; music, humour, and books.

[Trevor] In those days the focus was music: we both played guitar, and after a while we started writing songs together. This eventually led to us forming a band, doing gigs in London, forming a second band, and continuing to write even after that band broke up. The first band was The Dave and the second was called Things in Bags. The gimmick with The Dave was that we were all called Dave. Then we recruited a singer whose real name actually was Dave, so we had to come up with a new name for the band.

Sadly the band never charted, but their compositions could occasionally be heard in the background of a radio advert for a music paper called Musicians Only.

[Trevor] We're still awaiting the royalties!

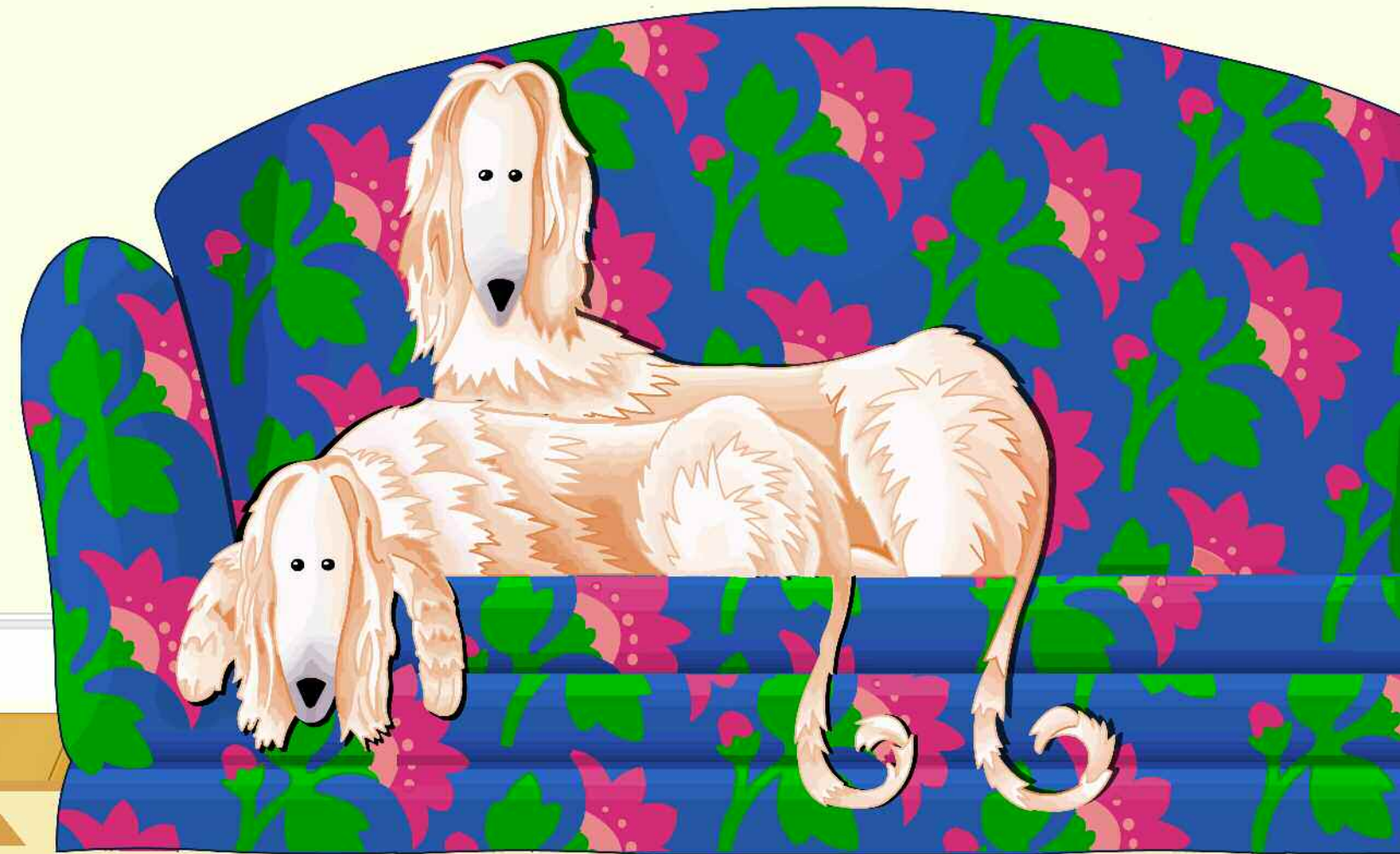
An interest in computers and adventures began when Trevor was at University studying for a PhD. He whiled away many hours playing Crowther and Wood's original *Colossal Caves* waiting for experiments to finish.

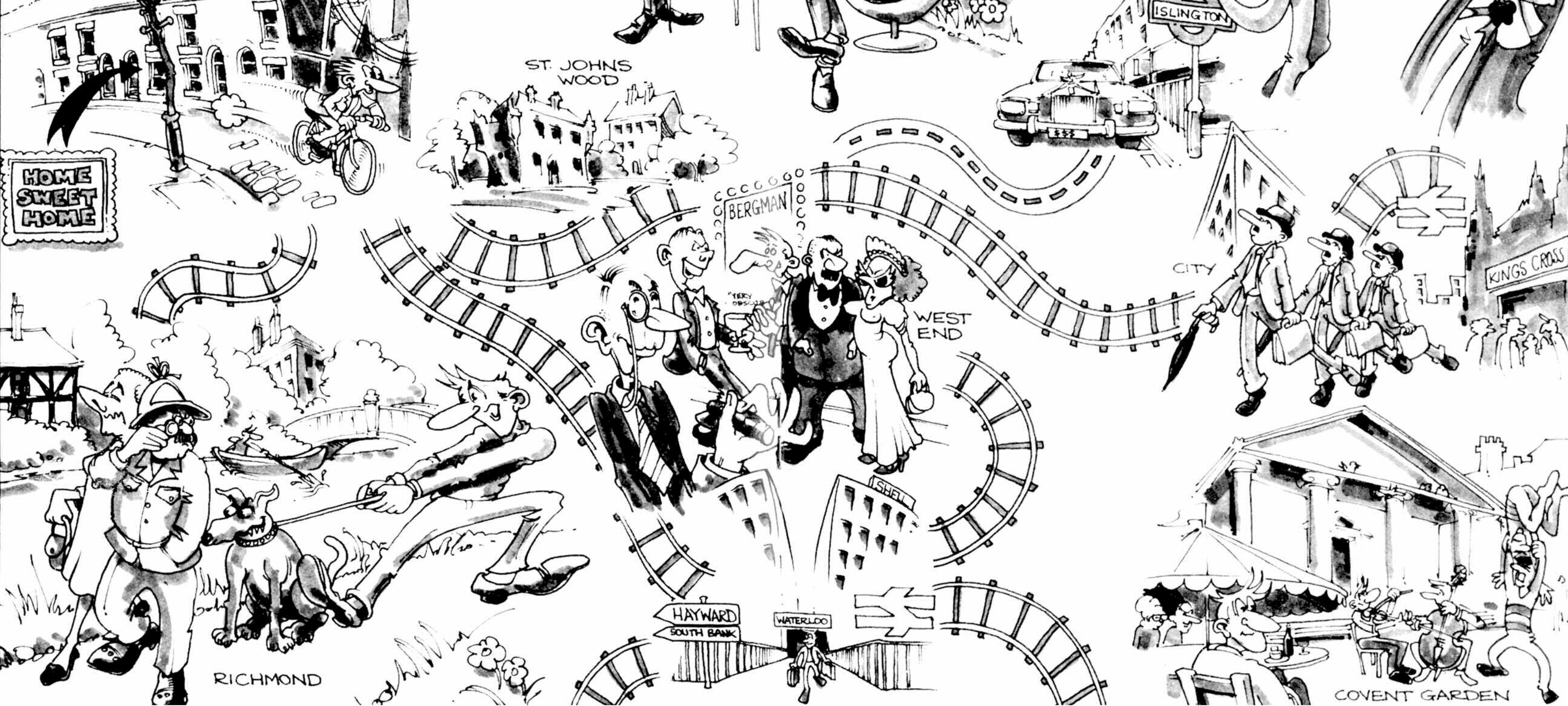
[Trevor] I was intrigued with the possibilities, more than I was with the game. The idea of creating a whole new world and then giving others the possibility to inhabit and interact with it was something I hadn't come across before. It was like writing a book and then getting inside the reader's mind to see how they experienced the book.

Peter and Trevor had access to Trevor's Sinclair Spectrum that he used as part of his University studies. Unfortunately their coding abilities didn't match their ambition for an adventure game.

[Trevor] It was some kind of Spectrum. Was the ZX the one with rubber keys? Anyway, that's the one we used. We didn't do any coding – we didn't know how.

[Peter] [We] had a few games, but mostly [Trevor] was using it to learn





BASIC for work.

[Trevor] I needed to do some quantitative analysis of output from a Gas Chromatograph. I wrote a program on the Spectrum to speed up the calculations that I was performing manually. Well, you did ask!

With just a single Spectrum that was "stuck together with Sellotape, and only worked if you hit it really hard" it was difficult to program anything, let alone attempt to write a full game.

[Trevor] Those rubber keys were a pain in the arse. Peter was (and still is) a journalist and was used to a real typewriter to get the job done and hated the keyboard. We [could] be a little impatient at times and that [would] be taken out on the keyboard. Also having to wait bloody ages for the thing to load from cassette could really kill the creative juices if we had an idea over a beer and then wanted to get it down and into [a] game.

It's now a familiar story, but the answer to their programming quandary came with the release of Gilsoft's *The Quill* in 1983. For the first time it gave the pair the tools to enable them to consider writing an adventure together. It was a genre that appealed for some many reasons over any other style of game.

[Peter] The money, fame and women. Well, mainly the women.

[Trevor] When *The Quill* came out, [I] showed it to Pete when he was over one evening. We started working on a game that night, probably the early stages of *Hampstead*. *The Quill* was designed to help people like us create simple text adventures with VERB NOUN commands, e.g. GET SPATULA or STRANGLE FARAGE.

Hampstead was a game about social mobility, and climbing the social ladder. The player begin in a filthy council flat wearing only their underwear and had to rise from those humble beginnings to reach the pinnacle of social status. It started life as an idea for a board

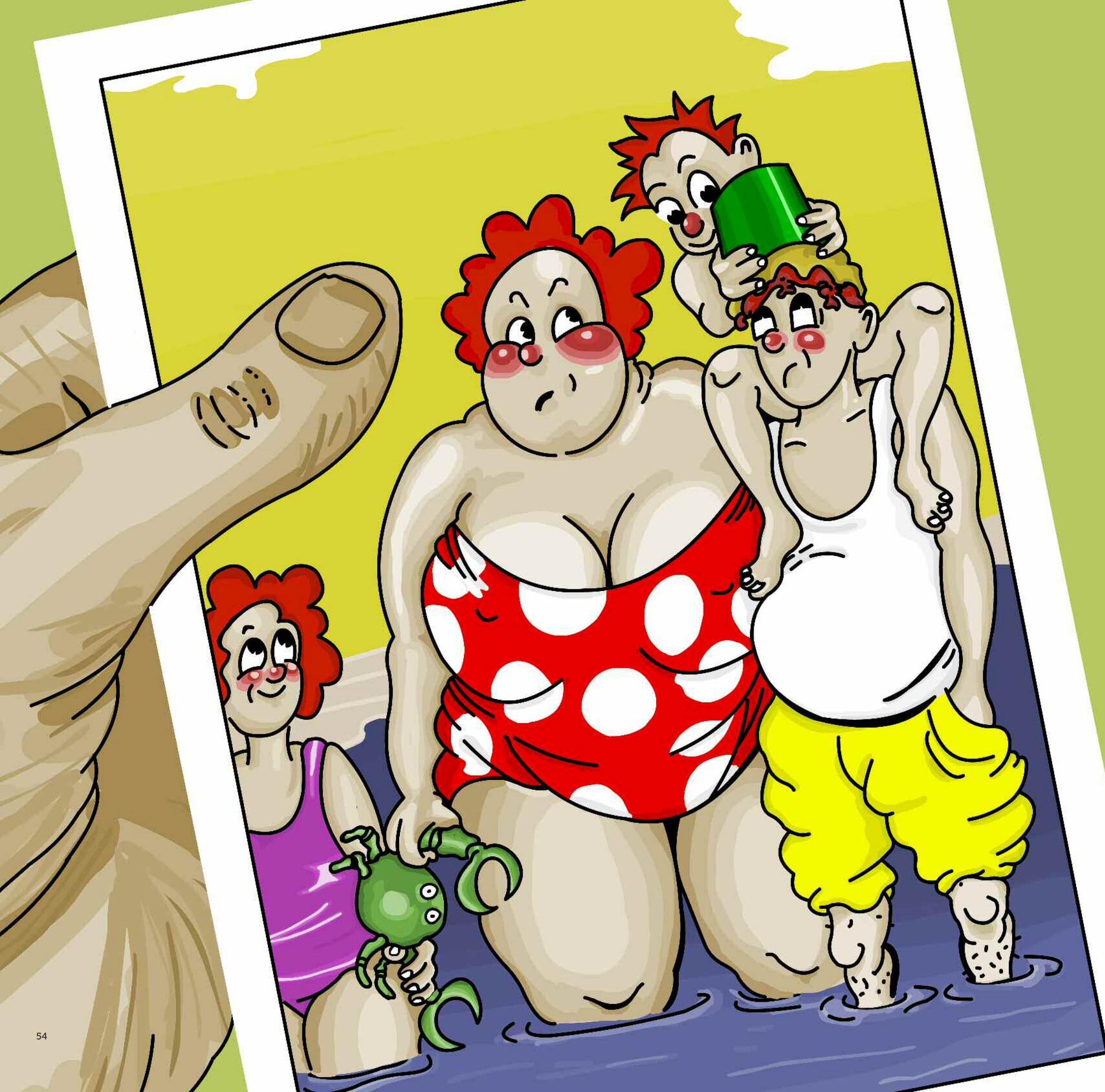
game.

[Trevor] We had the idea for a social climbing 'game' as a satire of what was happening in society around us. The board game idea lasted about 10 minutes. [I] had noticed that home computers were becoming popular, beginning to challenge the traditional arcade games, and every kid seemed to have a Spectrum or an Acorn or a Commodore 64. Looking back, *Hampstead* would still work pretty well as a board game. Probably better, in fact.

It was heavily influenced by the British concept of "class" – something that still affects society of today, but in the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher the concept was more prevalent than ever.

[Trevor] We were both living in shitty flats. One of the interesting things about London is the way really down-at-heel areas are often right next to the posh bits: you turn a corner and – bang! – completely different vibe. Peter's place was in a particularly grim area

[Above] If you are still confused, then the game's accompanying booklet shows you in pictorial form the best route to achieving Hampstead.



of north-west London, but we couldn't help noticing that nearby Hampstead was a great deal nicer. In 1983, when we were starting to create this game, the Tory attack on the welfare state had barely begun, but we were already noticing that suddenly it was cool to be a money-grabbing bastard.

[Peter] If we were writing it today the themes of Brexit and Trump would feature heavily.

[Trevor] I think it would be Hampstead in reverse. You start with a reasonable society - not perfect - but progressing step by step. You then have the goal of reducing practically everyone's life to misery, poverty and isolationism - whilst ensuring that you don't get caught with your snout in the trough.

Hampstead became a perfect medium for the partnership to flourish, and each brought their individual qualities to the writing.

[Trevor] Peter is the real creative genius. During our writing sessions he would lie stretched out on a chaise-longue in his green silk dressing gown, smoking a pipe and dictating the jokes, which [I] would then tap into the computer as best [I] could whilst wiping away tears of laughter. At least, that's how Peter remembers it. The reality may have been slightly different.

Despite the influence of *Colossal Caves*, *Hampstead* with its social themes proved to be a welcome move away from the fantasy worlds of every other adventure of the time.

[Trevor] We were in our late twenties - quite a bit older than the target market for games at the time. Running about after gnomes and elves in search of a magic key seemed a bit lame to us. We wanted something that was based on reality, not some fantasy world or far away planet. We liked the TV dramas of Mike Leigh, comedies about ordinary life. We did *Hampstead* for a laugh, to amuse ourselves, with absolutely no thought about selling it. That's why it works: we were not beholden to anyone's marketing strategy. We wanted the player to relate to the locations and problems and motivation behind the game. It became the sort of thing that when the teenagers had put down their joysticks and gone to bed, the parents would pick up their games console and load up *Hampstead* for a bit of fun. That did happen - but the teenagers also seemed to get into it as well.

Peter commented to the Independent newspaper that "it was the least commercial idea you could possibly come up with. But for some reason, all the publishers wanted it." In the end, the duo decided to trust Melbourne House to release the game.

[Trevor] We'd done a bit of research on the games companies, and it was clear at the time that Melbourne House were way ahead of the other publishers in terms of sophistication and quality. They'd brought out *The Hobbit*, and at the same time as *Hampstead* they launched *Sherlock*, which we thought was great. It sounds a bit pretentious now, but we were starting to get ideas about turning books into games. At one point Peter wrote to the publishers of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, asking for the game rights, but they said no. The fools!

Anyway, with *Hampstead* we approached a dozen games companies and got positive responses from just about all of them. We went to see several, and we had offers, but Melbourne House impressed us the most.

It received tremendous reviews, Crash said it was the "most original adventure theme released this year" and Popular Computing Weekly

[Left] Wish you were here in *Terrormolinos* receives the British saucy postcard treatment for its inlay and advertisement artwork.

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You are in the social security
office, a sadly familiar sight.
A slowly moving queue shuffles
towards the only working clerk.

Tell me what to do:
> JOIN QUEUE
OK.

Time passes...

You have reached the desk.
The clerk takes your UB40 and
offers you a GIRO CHEQUE.

Tell me what to do:
>

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[Hampstead] *Hampstead* is the social-ladder scaling adventure that announced the comedic pairing of Jones and Lever to the world.

Written with *The Quill*, Melbourne House embraced the game, publishing it in one of their oversized boxes [alongside *Sherlock* and *Castle of Terrors*] and packaged a beautifully written and funny manual.

It seems class isn't a solely British trait either, as *Hampstead* received a full Spanish translation, *Bienvenido a Hampstead*, courtesy of Daniel Querol Bures.

[Terrormolinos] Many classic British TV shows and films in the 70s tapped into the premise of a package holiday to a nightmare seaside resort. Lever and Jones created their own, and sent players on a terrifying excursion to *Terrormolinos*.

Gilsoft extended *The Quill* with *The Illustrator* and *Terrormolinos* used it to introduce Saucivision - where the player takes photographs in the form of saucy seaside postcards to complete the game.

Alongside the BBC Micro, Spectrum and Commodore versions, Amstrad owners were also given passports and could join the Kwikhof Tours party.

[Dodgy Geezers] In *Dodgy Geezers* you start in a prison cell, having paid your dues, and done porridge for your part in the Long Ditton Spaghetti Caper.

It seems that your stretch hasn't rehabilitated you from a life of crime, and the temptation of a life exiled to the resort of *Terrormolinos* in luxury is too much to resist. In *Geezers* you're tasked with assembling your band of unsavoury criminals and doing one last job.

Running on a modified version of *The Quill*, *Geezers* features some decent location graphics, cracking prose and neat puzzles. Split over two parts, the additional memory lets Lever and Jones' writing blossom, thus it's probably the best adventure from the duo.

commented that "*Hampstead* is funny and the humour genuine." In a wonderful example of irony, it achieved its own *Hampstead* when it was awarded "game of the year" from *The Listener* magazine - an exceptionally distinguished, niche and upmarket magazine created by the BBC in 1929.

[Trevor] We were amazed at the reception the game received. We got more press than *Sherlock* did, and that one got loads. We were a little worried that as we had developed the game using *The Quill* we would be looked down upon by the press and games players and it would be treated as 'not a real game'. But there was very little of that kind of snobbery.

Games that were created using Gilsoft's tool were left with indelible features that revealed their DNA. Some titles quickly received an unwelcome moniker. Reviewers would quickly comment if a game was "*Quill'd*" or not leading many to unfairly assume the utility limited the quality of the game.

[Trevor] Yes, *The Quill* was restrictive, and we wanted to do things that it wouldn't support. However, having restrictions can help the creative process. Sometimes having a blank sheet of paper and endless possibilities means you never start. Knowing the constraints, you have to work within can be helpful.

Hampstead sold 70,000 units, an exceptional number for an original British adventure that retailed at £9.95. Sales were boosted by the release of *The Quill* onto other platforms and Melbourne House took care of the ports to other machines. After buying a Commodore 64 ["so we could use a decent keyboard" - Trevor] and alongside the exalted appearance and accolade from *The Listener*, it seemed *Hampstead* truly was in reach of Jones and Lever.

[Peter] Trevor bought a new sofa. We then wrote a tune called *New Sofa*. Between us we only made enough to achieve Lewisham.

Sales of such magnitude would have usually resulted in a sequel, as Melbourne House had insisted with *The Hobbit*, but it was something that didn't interest Peter and Trevor.

[Trevor] We never discussed a sequel. This was in the days before every successful entertainment product must inevitably spawn a load of sequels and prequels.

In 2014 they both worked with John McManus to bring the game to Apple devices. It managed to propel the authors and the game back into the media spotlight, though *Hampstead* proved a difficult proposition for 21st century mobile audience. Despite its cumbersome interface, several players appreciated the update and that the game was free of charge. "Only been playing a day and guess what? It's just as addictive and utterly infuriating as it always was. [...] Now I just need to find my new romantic clothes and buy a ton of makeup and hairspray." commented one.

[Trevor] That was all John's work. He approached us and asked for permission to do the conversion, which we happily agreed to. We've no idea how many have downloaded and played it - John might be able to answer that one.

[Peter] Expectations have moved on a lot since those early games and text adventures on modern devices have not proved to be very popular. We are now in an age where attention spans have become shorter and instant gratification a pre-requisite. Neither of these can be easily satisfied with a text-only experience.

Their next game, *Terrormolinos*, released in 1985 held another mirror to British society and class stereotypes. As a prototype for today's Television series *Benidorm*, *Terrormolinos* took inspiration from films such as *Carry on Abroad* as the player was sent on a nightmare package holiday to their own *Els Bells*, the splendidly named *The Excrucio* hotel.

Peter told *Popular Computing Weekly* that "suitably enough, the idea came to us while we were walking on *Hampstead Heath* - a game about going on holiday". They based the puzzles and game play on a prophetic sales conference trip Trevor took to *Lloret De Mar*, and a

particularly torturous holiday in Greece.

[Trevor] Yes, all of the above. The idea developed from a new capability within *The Quill* to show images [*The Illustrator* add-on]. These were to illustrate the locations, but we had the idea of using them to show photographs that the user took as they went through the game. We then made it part of completing the game to take ten photographs at the correct time, usually to illustrate a gag of some sort.

[Peter] A number of different ideas came together in the creation of the game. Yes, going to the real Spanish seaside resort of *Torremolinos* was a staple of popular culture. But we were also looking at the whole idea of the British seaside holiday, and in particular the saucy postcards of Donald McGill. And yes, the *Carry On* films. By now games were starting to include graphics, and it was hilarious how slowly these crude block colours would take to load on the screen. It looked similar to the way a Polaroid photo would develop. And that gave us the idea for the object of the game, which was to take 10 photographs in certain key situations.

It was even more left-field than *Hampstead*, and Melbourne House didn't quite understand what Lever and Jones were offering them. "Melbourne House trusted us and wanted to follow it up", Peter recalled to *Popular Computing Weekly*. "With *Terrormolinos* they weren't so sure [and] with the company being run from Australia the decision was taken in Melbourne. [...] I don't think they could quite reconcile the scenario of *Terrormolinos* with *Bondi Beach*."

[Trevor] [...] They were certainly pleased that we'd thought of a way to include graphics. Most publishers would have found our work a little 'left-field' as we were trying to do something completely different. But if you think about all those popular culture references in *Terrormolinos*, it was actually very mainstream. By the way, the title was Fred Milgrom's idea. It was originally called *Holiday in the Sun*, after the *Sex Pistols* song.

[Peter] Our contract gave Melbourne House first refusal on anything else we created. We didn't formally pitch the idea to them - we just went ahead and did it. Perhaps we thought that if Melbourne House don't like this then one of the other publishers might.

Playing as Dad, the key to a successful and enjoyable holiday was to look after your family [wife Beryl and kids Doreen and Ken] and take souvenir photographs of your time abroad. It wasn't quite that easy, as photographs had to be taken in certain situations and at certain times in order to prove that you had survived your ordeal.

It was called Saucivision and relied on a little bit of trial and error from the player [they could afford 2 "dud" photos], along with a game mechanic of having to be in the right place at the right time. It encouraged multiple plays of the game to learn where the photos should be taken.

[Trevor] Saucivision was us developing the Donald McGill theme. The characters in these postcards - in our minds - were the family that we put into the game. We'd had some feedback on *Hampstead* being "too easy" to complete. But we didn't want this to be a difficult game: if the player gave up, they wouldn't see all of the gags through to the end. I think that the right or wrong aspect of Saucivision may have been a reaction to that. And anyway, you can always save the game before you TAKE PHOTO.

It did also suffer from several scenarios where instant-death, or instant game-over would occur - sunstroke, attempting to go on holiday and forgetting the passport are just two. It's a feature of early adventures that perhaps would change if written today, or be better signposted.

[Peter] We wouldn't use the word 'suffer'. No one was hurt (that we are aware of) during the making of this game.

No trip to the seaside would be complete without a stick of rock and a "wish you were here" postcard, and *Terrormolinos* featured cover and in-game artwork reminiscent of the saucy and innuendo-laden images that successive generations of holidaymakers enjoyed.

COR BLIMEY, GUV'NOR, LET'S 'AVE A KNEESUP ROUND THE OLD JOANNA

Dodgy Geezers came with a surprise musical bonus on the flip-side of the computer cassette - a full Only Fools & Horses or Chas and Dave [English rockney duo] style theme song written and performed by Trevor and Peter [with extraneous noises by Murray Anderson, Colin Flint and Sally Cowlshaw].

Called [surprisingly] *Dodgy Geezers*, the "diabolical" lyrics supposedly gave players hints and tips for the game. Whether they did is debateable, but they certainly introduced each of the villains that appeared in the adventure.

For your sing-a-long pleasure, here are the lyrics in full. All together now

George is down the building site looking for a steady job
Tricks has lost his licence because he drives like a bit of a yob
Crackers on the rampage, he's got to take the matter in hand
And Soapy's in the nightclub drinking lagers and getting canned
(well he would do wouldn't he?)

[chorus]

Dodgy Geezers, they're only nice lads at heart
Dodgy Geezers, they like a pint and a game of darts
(don't we all John, bloody right)

Well now I look at Mr Video and Spice Wick is his favourite game
Whereas Tweedle is a betting man, he's got quite a name
Little Ken is a gentleman, and he's very fond of cats
Gary is the bloke, if you want to get your tit for tat

[chorus]

Dodgy Geezers, they're only nice lads at heart
Dodgy Geezers, they like a pint and a game of darts

Working in a factory, oh what a boring job
But on a proper little caper you get more than a couple of bob
So take a tip from your Mum and Dad, and that's what really counts
Don't take a Dodgy Geezer's cheque cos it's sure to bounce

[chorus]

Dodgy Geezers, they're only nice lads at heart
Dodgy Geezers, they like a pint and a game of darts
(I think I'm going home, I've had enough of this caper)

TIME GENTLEMEN PLEASE!

If you haven't got the original cassette, or a cassette player then several sites have created an MP3 version of the track that can be download and enjoyed on modern audio equipment. Try:

<https://spectrumcomputing.co.uk>
<http://www.worldofspectrum.org>
<https://cpcruez.fr>

Despite the cultural gap, the Australian publisher embraced this bastion of British tradition.

[Trevor] We did rough artwork for the game and the pics that are taken throughout the game. We tried to base the design and style on Donald McGill's [renowned British postcard artist] work. We briefed Melbourne House as to what we were trying to achieve, and their artist didn't do a bad job actually. At the time Melbourne House was based in Hampton Wick, which was very close to us, so it wasn't difficult to meet up and review things.

It struck a chord with gamers and critics alike, receiving perhaps the ultimate accolade on the Spectrum - a coveted Crash Smash from Derek Brewster in December of 1985. "*Terrormolinos* is a superb adventure which will appeal to a very broad audience" he said, "a nice holiday from zapping little green aliens." A good relationship with adventure journalists wasn't deemed essential, but good reviews were.

[Peter] We never saw ourselves as part of the 'adventure community'. That's not being snooty, by the way. We just didn't know them. Most of them went along with the gags. They understood there was a lot of kidology going on, and it was always fun meeting up with them. Especially when they were paying for the drinks.

[Trevor] We felt that *Terrormolinos* was all round a better game. *Hampstead* we kind of wrote as we went along. It wasn't until we were two thirds of the way through the game that we agreed on what the ending was. With *Terrormolinos* we had the narrative arc pretty much worked out on paper before we booted up the Commodore 64. Getting positive reviews we saw as affirmation that we were going in the right direction.

Aside from the saucy contents, it courted controversy of a different nature, with a copyright infringement contest from Little Softie software. They claimed the nightmare holiday theme was taken from their adventure title, *Benidorm*, released a year earlier [though no physical version has ever surfaced online]. Commodore User magazine in January 1986 reported that the altercation was handled amicably by Melbourne House in light of the litigation from Little Softie's Ray Kearney.

[Peter] You've sort of answered your own question. We'd never heard of *Benidorm* until then, obviously. But I can guarantee our game is funnier.

It was a case of overlapping ideas rather than plagiarism, with *Terrormolinos* and *Benidorm* taking far differing approaches. Besides, if the legal case did succeed it could have set a precedent for the plethora of games that all featured Hobbits, Dwarves, Treasure, Castles Orcs and Dragons.

Peter and Trevor's final game did meander along a well trodden theme. *Dodgy Geezers*, released in 1986 was a classic gangster yarn, in the mould of a Michael Caine or Bob Hoskins film. It was their largest adventure to date, having to be split into two chapters. Rumour was that the game had been in development for over a year and had the working title of *Villains*.

[Peter] No [that's not true], although that's a better title than *Dodgy Geezers*, which was imposed on us by the distributor. We originally wanted to call it *Isle of Dogs*. The game was inspired by 1950's/60's heist films, with a dash of *The Sweeney*, which was a popular TV cop show at the time.



[Right] A recreation of the *Dodgy Geezers* artwork.

HANDHELD HAMPSTEAD

Hampstead was released in 2014 on the Appstore by John McManus and his AppyAppster company.

McManus developed his own proprietary engine using segments of source code taken from John Elliott's *Quill* disassembly program *UnQuill*.

Despite the port having a dreadfully clumsy interface, it's free, and [thanks to *UnQuill*] is completely faithful to the original adventure, so worth a [brief] look.

<https://appyappster.com/>

[Trevor] We're starting to realise we had a similar relationship with the truth in those days as Donald Trump has now. Maybe we should sue him for stealing our idea.

[Peter] *Hampstead* took 4 months, *Terrormolinos* 6 months and *Dodgy Geezers* close to a year. [We were still working full time] - we had bills to pay! We also had the band and were writing songs and doing gigs as well.

For the first time full location graphics appeared, created by Melbourne House from rough sketches of visuals from both Peter and Trevor. The *Geezers* in question were a colourful identify parade of characters including Bullet Proof George, Mr Video and Soapy, perhaps in part resembling characters that the pair encountered. To underline it's London genes, a good smattering of cockney-rhyming slang was introduced for good measure.

[Trevor] The only real-life villain we knew was Peter's landlady's boyfriend, Gough. He sold Peter his first car, a Mini Clubman that he'd spray-painted white to cover up the rust.

[Peter] You'd never Adam-and-Eve it. We both grew up in and around London, and we both knew our slang. Or, if we didn't, we would make it up.

On the reverse side of each cassette Melbourne House included a *Dodgy Geezers* theme song written by Peter and Trevor, harking back to their days in various bands together. It's a brilliant and unique "feelie" for an adventure game, performed with the help of several of the duo's friends.

[Trevor] It was a Chas'n'Dave type song we used to play with The Dave, called Surrey Geezer. We just changed the words to include references to the game.

Though the lyrics were a bit of fun, they gave an insight into the game's personalities and in a very small way helped to complete the game.

[Peter] We've spent the last 30 years trying to forget [the lyrics]. We do remember going into the studio to record the song, with Trevor's ex-wife on backing vocals. Although she was not the ex-wife at the time, but is now.

[Trevor] The song got played once on the radio as an intro to an interview we did. No royalties have ever been paid to anyone - and I have a legal divorce document stating that to prove it. Maybe Pete and I paid for [the recording session]? I forget now - although we did use the Madness piano player in that session!

It was a great piece of PR from Melbourne House, and ensured that the game received plenty of press. Magazines also featured a lot of moody photographs of the authors looking like the archetypal dodgy

geezers from the game's title.

[Peter] We always liked poncing about in silly costumes. Trevor still does. Except nowadays they're his normal clothes.

All three games are wonderfully British - from their locations, theme and characters, through to their glorious comedic writing.

[Trevor] We share a very similar sense of humour and comedy heroes. People like Peter Cooke & Dudley Moore, Steve Martin, the cartoon world of B. Kliban. We weren't interested in doing anything serious and we didn't actually play any other computer adventure games ourselves.

Geezers is a fine swansong, for a pair blessed with such a diverse range of creative talents. With the purchase of Melbourne House by Mastertronic their outlet seemed to be stifled as the new owners didn't have the same appetite for adventures as their previous hosts.

[Peter] [...] Between us writing *Terrormolinos* and writing *Dodgy Geezers*, Fred Milgrom sold Melbourne House to a tacky budget outfit called Mastertronic. Unlike Melbourne House, they didn't have a clue what we were trying to do.

[Trevor] [Also] the rise in the quality of graphics meant we couldn't keep up. Text-only adventures were becoming obsolete, and the trend was towards more visual games with an instant appeal. We had ideas, but not the means to implement them.

Terrormolinos remains the pair's best game, in Trevor's words, it was the most clearly and effectively conceived idea. All three games are testament to a pair of writers unafraid to take on challenging and different narratives, and typically British themes - no stone left unturned because it may prove to be too taboo or not suitable for publication.

[Trevor] If you mean in the sense of nudity or swearing, no - because we never had any in the first place. We only had to leave things out because of the memory limitations of the computer. It would have been great to describe locations over a couple of paragraphs, rather than a couple of sentences.

[Peter] With more memory comes more gags, prose and locations. It's an age-old truth. Oh, and maybe more women? [...] It's great that [people] still enjoy playing them - we haven't in years. The old Commodore 64 is up in the attic gathering dust. I'm not aware that the Englishness confused people - I think it added to the sense of location and atmosphere of the game.

After leaving the industry, Peter and Trevor channeled their creativity into other endeavours, such as music and writing.

[Trevor] Peter has written a few books since we did the computer games, and we have written a lot of music together recently. So in one respect the creativity hasn't stopped.

There hasn't been a return to computer games, despite a hint at some unfinished projects, and magazine interviews suggesting that the pair would have liked to attempt an adaption of a John Le Carre novel. Could there possibly be a return of Little Ken?

[Trevor] After 30 years of not thinking about games, we've recently had a brilliant idea for a new one - but we would need a technical team to put it together. So, if any game houses are reading this - get in touch! We were once approached to do a PD James book conversion, but neither of us can remember what happened to that.

[Peter] No Little Ken died on a safari expedition to Kenya. A tragic accident and no camera in the vicinity to record those fateful events. The new idea is set in the present time and spans several European locations. It's - hopefully - tapping into a bit of a trend at the moment. Oh, and you start off dead.

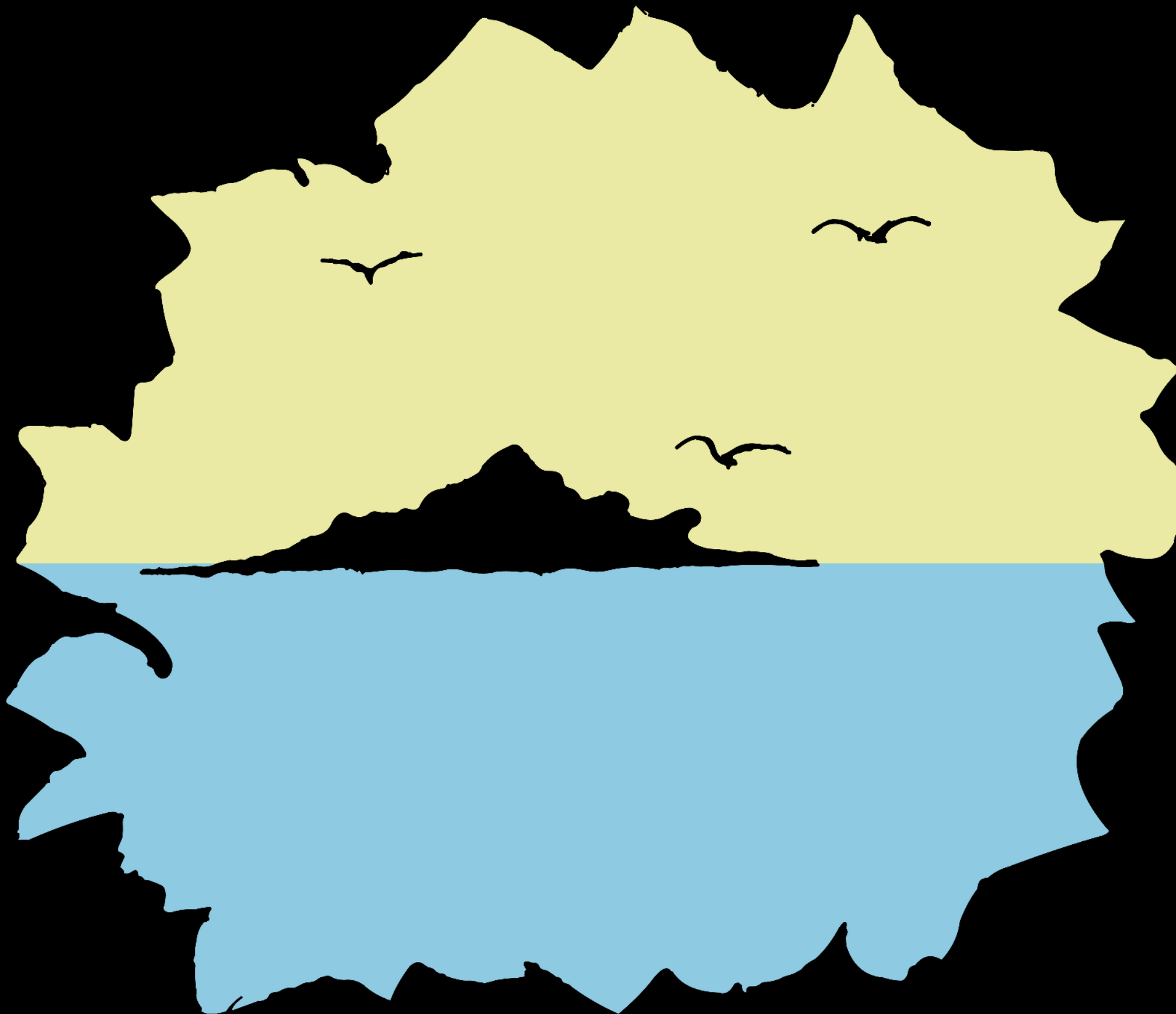


DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Whilst performing their latest sea shanty, crewmates Peter Jones and Trevor Lever take their eye off the tiller and HMS *Hampstead* runs aground on a desert island. They've only five text adventures to play until help arrives.

We never really played adventure games. Our heroes were from TV, films and stand-up comedy, so it's almost impossible to give you a top five.

We'll pick any two of ours, *Sherlock*, *The Hobbit* and *Colossal Caves* would not only be a top five - but a top five from the only six games that we have played.



SHEFFIELD SIGNPOSTS

Sheffield is still regarded as the Steel City, renowned for its heritage and reputation in steel production. After the city's post-war manufacturing decline, the 80s witnessed an industrial revolution of information, and leading the way for British videogames were Alligata Software, Gremlin Graphics and a host of bedroom coders emerging from her womb. **Mark Aldrich, Nick Aldrich and Richard Stevenson** were the first, writing text adventures from a leafy Sheffield suburb.

There were no computers at all in school when Mark Aldrich entered his first year at Jordanthorpe Secondary School in 1977. On the cusp of the computer age an interested teacher, Mr Spencer, lobbied to obtain the school's first machines. With the blessing of the Head Master he started the first computer club, and it became so popular with kids that bookings had to be taken in 20 minute slots to use the devices.

The club was to affect the lives of many youngsters at the school, including Mark's brother Nicholas and friends Richard Stevenson and Phil Durbidge – all who lived close to each other in the Sheffield suburb of Bradway.

[Richard] Mr Spencer [...] approached the Head Master, a Mr Cook, and asked if there was any space rooms were he could house the computers. The Head was interested, and allowed him on the condition that if any pupil showed interest they'd be allowed to use them.

[Mark] [The computer club] was a small room, full of NASCOMS, the original 16K black and white machine connected to a self-standing

ADVENTURES WITH BITE!

Industry legends Anthony Crowther and Ben Daglish started writing BASIC text adventures and educational software for the BBC Micro when they were both at school. They called themselves Aztec Software and used to play some of the early Acornsoft games available for the machine, cloning one of them for the Commodore VIC-20 computer. They began to understand the logic and coding requirements for a BASIC adventure interpreter and started to adapt the framework for their own games.

Tony wrote *Aztec Tomb Adventure* [initially on a Commodore PET at Superior Systems where he worked part time] and was a straight text-only affair that was later updated for a commercial release with PETSCII graphics. *Tomb* was released by Alligata Software in 1983 along with *Here Comes The Sun*, and a follow-up called *Aztec Tomb Revisited* in 1984.

TV, no sound and extremely basic. In later years we got an Apple II, which was amazing because it had a floppy disk. It was the first time you turned off a computer and it remembered what you'd done. That was the bees knees.

During school hours the computer club was strictly devoted to blossoming Computer Studies and other related subjects that the school offered. After hours it was a different matter, and open to experimentation where to their delight, many of the pupils found that the mainframe machines housed games.

[Mark] [...] There was a teleprinter connected to a University. I remember *Mugwumps* [an early mainframe game where the player is tasked with finding four "Mugwumps" that are randomly hidden on a 10x10 grid] was on there, you could type GO NORTH AND GO SOUTH – it'd go down the line and you get back a [response]. It was a basic adventure. It may have had the original *Colossal Adventure* too, which I remember very fondly. In the after-school club you got the NASCOM versions of *Space Invaders* appearing. All of the space bars were at an angle because all of the kids were hammering the space bar to fire.

To fund the computer obsession the Aldrich brothers pursued a raft of entrepreneurial schemes to earn money. Taking orders for picked strawberries, mowing gardens, buying sweets from a warehouse and selling them door-to-door, and car washing were amongst the many wheezes dreamed up to earn an honest bob. With their money it was a trip down to Abbeydale Road in Sheffield and to a shop called Datron Micro Centre. They bought and upgraded their first Sinclair machines from the specialist.

[Nick] [Mark] bought a ZX80 and then a ZX81 when you had to make them in kit form. [...] It had a shit keyboard because it was one where you put in the membrane yourself. Then we bought an original grey keyed Speccy where the paint came off from the keyboards - when they started them at 16K. When Mark upgraded I used to get them for Christmas.

With the Sinclair machine at home, Mark was soon bitten by the programming bug, and took inspiration from older pupils studying formal computing subjects at school. They were pushing the boundaries of the machines housed in the computer club, and even writing in exotic languages other than BASIC. But for Mark, it was a start.

[Mark] I never got past BASIC. I wasn't taught how to program, it was all about learning from other people.

[Nick] I think what was interesting about [that] time was that

[everything was written in] BASIC. [...] People were only just starting [to] develop in Machine Code, [and the fact] that you sold games in BASIC was quite incredible.

[Mark] Everything was BASIC. There was one or two of the guys who were doing proper Computer Studies doing things like PASCAL and FORTRAN and stuff, but the majority of people were starting with 10 PRINT "Hello" 20 GOTO 10 - and some people never went beyond that. What I did do was watching and learning, and doing stuff, and I picked things up.

[Nick] You couldn't go and buy a game you had to create a game.

[Mark] That's so true. You bought a computer and there was very little content available and very few channels to buy things from. Shops like Datron were all business focused, they only sold business machines. [...] You bought [a computer] and created with it.

It was a new and exciting way to be creative, and Mark's enthusiasm rubbed off on best friend John Wigglesworth. As well as being industrious, they were both naturally creative, having engineered and produced small theatre shows as younger children. Now a little older, they took inspiration from something more mature, and it became the catalyst behind their foray into game making,

[Mark] I can't remember how it precisely started. A love of games and wanting to create something? My best mate for many years was John [Wigglesworth] [...] [so] it was natural we spent a lot of time together, and it was natural we [created games] together.

You could take something from your brain and create something. Historically you had to be good with your hands to do that – pottery or drawing or whatever, unless you were good at literature or poetry. For the first time, those that were mathematical or logical were able to go into creativity.

Things like fantasy and folklore [inspired me]. I loved *The Hobbit*, our father read it to us a couple of times. I'd read bits of *The Lord of the Rings*, and so I suspect there was always that love, but more about love of an adventure game.

Mark and John called themselves SpecSoft, and started to write adventures based upon their passions. It was postscript to his entrepreneurialism, and a way to say at 15 years of age that they had their own company. Alongside SpecSoft, they ran another imaginary business that traded from the Aldrich home - the Waxon Corporation. Their love of enterprise was reflected in several game screens and on some of the inlays where the publisher address referenced "SpecSoft (Department 1)" - Mark's bedroom.

Their first game, *Castle of Doom* [sometimes referred to online as *SpecSoft 64K*] was bundled with an arcade game based on *Missile Command*, called, erm, *Missile Command* on Side B, was written for the 16K Spectrum [in four parts, hence 64K]. It was very simplistic and followed a traditional fantasy storyline where the player traversed countryside, mountains and towns looking for the keys to unlock their way into the Castle.

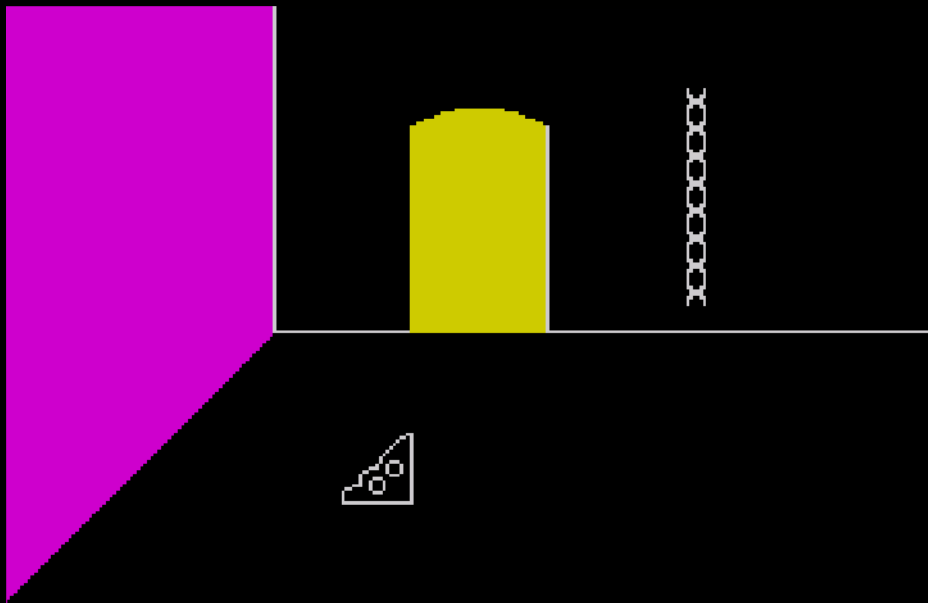
It was a rather hum-drum linear affair but earned a review from adventure guru Tony Bridge in the 30 June 1983 issue of *Popular Computer Weekly*. "I found the map-making enjoyable" beamed Tony, "but ultimately the game palled - not least because there is no point to the proceedings."

[Mark] That sounds right. [...] From memory it was very simple. You are here, north, south, east and west. There's something here and you can pick it up and carry it.

After *Castle of Doom* came *The Village of Death* [perhaps just down the road from the Castle] – this time written on Mark's brand new upgraded 48K Spectrum. It was described in the inlay as being "a pleasure for all the family" and a "marvel in computer programming". It starts with a crudely drawn newspaper, and a teletype telegram to the protagonist [a Mr Scarisbrick] giving the background to a missing village where everyone perishes trying to find it.



The *Castle of Doom* inlay artwork. Mark always maintained that a mysterious treasure had been hidden away in its iconography.



[Operation Roman Gaul] In SpecSofts final adventure, *Operation Roman Gaul* has you cast as Ajax The Cleaner, in a quest to be free from a Roman Galley and commission a soothsayer.

In a fine demonstration of the evolution of Mark Aldrich's programming and John Wigglesworths' writing talents, the game exhibits a fine sense of parody, a humorous plot, a wide vocabulary and is a fitting swansong from two of Sheffield's first bedroom coders.



[The Black Tower] The follow-up to *Suicide Island* follows the same "move from one location to another trying to find three keys" methodology, but introduces several enhancements to the graphics, vocabulary and location descriptions. The mysterious "Josh" makes his second appearance, and even Derek Brewster enjoyed the naive approach taken by the boy from Sheffield, saying in his Crash review "I hope Dollarsoft forgive me for one moment, but this no-nonsense northern description of adventuring I found genuinely amusing."



[Football Frenzy] You are the manager of mediocre football club Grimthorpe Rangers who have somehow managed to secure a place in the Cup Final. Your job is to get your club to the stadium on time for the big game by overcoming the various mundane obstacles put in your way. It's a valiant attempt at something different, and the game has some competent graphics, an extensive vocabulary and does inject the odd bout of humour here and there. Unfortunately *Football Frenzy* doesn't quite transfer the excitement of football management into the written word, and turns any wannabe Pep Guardiola into a spreadsheet wrestling, bill paying, dullard. For die-hard soccer fans only.

Interestingly Gremlin Graphics attempted something similar with their *Roy of the Rovers* game in 1988, splitting it into two parts, the first being a point-and-click adventure, and the second a sub-standard football sim.

[Mark] [We] did [the games] in the downstairs room, we'd get big A3 pieces of paper and draw out the [map] boxes. Every night after school, you'd do your homework, and we'd do three or four hours of this. I would be sitting there coding the stuff, and John would be drawing the pictures and working out the puzzles. For the graphics, John would draw the lines and I'd work out how to do the fill.

[When] creating a world, it's really rewarding to create puzzles that someone unfolds. [...] I've just started to play *No Mans Sky*. It's that thing, [me as] the player, going somewhere and not knowing what I'm going to find. [This] reality is not much different [to *No Mans Sky*] - we set it up to get to the prize here, you needed one of those, and you had to have one of those, and to get that you had to open the door, and to do that you needed the key.

[Nick] Part of the drive to create this grid was when you got *Crash or Zzap!* And because we were brought up on *Monopoly* or *Connect 4* or that was it. It was finite. To be able to create something that you were creating yourself and you could unfold, it was a journey.

[Mark] [And] a story. I loved *The Hobbit* when it first came out on the Spectrum. It was really the first graphical adventure I remember. Do you remember the speed of the drawing, with a line, a line, and then it would fill in? I almost felt that when you'd been brought up on the written word it was almost taking something away. It's the difference between a book and a film, you're immediately given what the book looked like. It was exciting from a graphic perspective, the wow, but in terms of the adventure in the mind it takes something away. Oh, I didn't imagine it like that in the book - this is how I imagined it - it takes something away.

Village of Death contained a response time measured in days, a great selection of schoolboy spelling and grammar, and several strange characters [including Groucho Marx and Sir Clive Sinclair], but did demonstrate a lovely naivety of programming with a willingness to experiment, and some more sophisticated ideas such as hunger and sparse, primitive graphics [with the usual laboriously slow fill routine].

Once again, the game was reviewed in *Popular Computer Weekly* by Tony Bridge, who gave it glowing praise despite its flaws. "Descriptions are sometimes very well written, and the adventure looks as if it will be quite rewarding" he commented.

[Mark] [Magazine reviews were] very rewarding. We knew at the time we weren't as good as others, but for magazines it made commercial sense to promote as much as possible. To get in there we sent free copies off and kept our fingers crossed we'd get a review. Everything was on such a smaller scale. The whole media was paper magazines that you would buy, and not every newsagent would stock them.

Given the good feedback, and positivity around the duo's creativity and writing it is a shame that Gilsoft's *The Quill* arrived just a little too late to provide the programming heavy-lifting and a platform for their undoubted talents.

[Mark] [Our games] were BASIC. I'd [use] routines [from] the magazines, and the worst thing about BASIC was that someone could break into it. You couldn't break into professional [machine code] games so we learned a routine [that] would stop those keys working. It [made] them look cleverer than they were. I remember [The Quill], it was powerful, but it was too late. My code has nothing like that in it - the vast majority was long hand, the most awful programming imaginable - but it works.

Operation Roman Gaul was the final adventure coded by John and Mark. *Popular Computing Weekly* said "the graphics are simple but OK" and commented that it was "quite entertaining." It had a comedic element, some excellent and maturing writing, and a touch of *The Boggit* parody with the main protagonist, a Roman character called Ajax - employed as a cleaner.

[Mark] We didn't set out to do that, but it will have happened because we loved Asterix and Obelix [characters from a French comic series]. John loved Asterix and had all of the books, I had a few of them. John was heavily involved in the writing so the characters would have

CHARITY CALAMITY

Sheffield's Gremlin Graphics made their first and only foray into the world of text adventures with *Tinderbox*, a game based upon the Hans Christen Anderson fairy tale. Possibly the first-ever software title commissioned for charity, the children's adventure supported Bob Geldof's Ethiopian Appeal. It formed part of Rod Cousen's mobilisation of the games industry behind Soft Aid where profits from games and compilations were donated to the Ethiopian Appeal.

Despite it being a good samaritan, some elements of the press were particularly derogatory and pulled no punches. "As an adventure, it's a disgrace" lamented Sinclair User's Chris Bourne, "[it] contains large numbers of boring locations where little or nothing happens." Thankfully, Crash were slight more complimentary praising the game for catering for younger players.

come from him. The others are more generic.

While Mark and John were courting fame, Nick was inspired by their enterprise and joined forces with Richard Stevenson in an attempt to follow in big brother's adventuring footsteps. Mark's enthusiasm and perceived success rubbed off on Nick and Rich who both dreamed of releasing games of their own. They began programming and joined the Computer Club, as well as hanging around in Sheffield's Just Micro - a new computer shop that specialised in games software, and had a thriving coding community.

[Richard] Me and Nick had got into BASIC coding, we looked up to Mark and the way he was doing stuff. [In Just Micro] there were pockets of kids who were coders and they would congregate around the machines and knew each other really well. They would swap ideas - it would always be Commodore and Beeb. I'm sure of that. It was fast scrolling, sprites bouncing about, music and weird stuff, based on the kind of thing that Jeff Minter [a celebrated British indie developer] was doing. It would be "how did you do that?", and you'd go away and try and do something better. You'd come back next week and show that. You'd try and suss things out.

Adventures were a popular type-in listing in magazines, and a growing genre on computer shop shelves. Their structure made a good introduction into programming covering the main topics such as inputs, variables, branching and looping. Nick and Richard began working on a game they called *The Haunted House*.

[Nick] We couldn't do an arcade game in BASIC, so fundamentally it was about doing something that was straight-forward. Richard was into the code side and I was into the environment, and what was the story. The original adventures were literally "You are in a room, you can see a thing", I couldn't really code, my BASIC coding was, basic, my interest was in book writing or storytelling or drawing the maps. I used to like drawing maps.

[Richard] The plot was pretty poor. I remember there was a grid, 20 by 20 and we drew a path along it. If you come off that path, for example, if you went East, then you'd die. You'd have to memorise the route. If there was an object there it was quite a development. Go East - you can see the edge. Go East, bang, you fall off. It was very much like *The Adventure Game* on TV [a BBC children's show that debuted in 1980 that featured crude augmented reality]. The objects [in *Haunted House*] were very much irrelevant. [...] Nick designed an inlay cover - a winding pathway to the top of a hill, with black shadows as the cliffs fell away.

[Nick] I think there was a castle, and bats and stuff! [...] We were having fun. What we were doing wasn't about being entrepreneurs it was just about being fun.

Richard's Dad had noticed the interest his son was taking in computers and began flicking through the pages of the magazines

ALTERNATIVE ANGLES

Alternative Software was a publishing house founded by Roger Hulley in Pontefract in 1985. He employed the programming talents of PAL Productions in Sheffield, setup by former Alligata employee David Palmer.

Alternative released a wide range of games, including a series of adventures by prolific Sheffield author Charles A. Sharp. Sharp [aka The Dreaming Djinn], who also developed for Code Masters and Top Ten Software, chose some interesting and unusual subject-matter for his games including spoof *Deadenders* and sports-themed *Football Frenzy*, *Cricket Crazy* and *For Gold or Glory*.

Written Sean Ellis' *Graphic Adventure Creator*, they didn't impress the reviewers [with *Necris Dome* perhaps the best of the bunch] but nevertheless demonstrated the mindset of British developers in the 80s, and their willingness to tackle subjects that interested them.

he was reading. Noticing several adverts requesting programs for publication he asked for a few copies of the finished game and began sending them off to be evaluated – under the moniker of SAA Software – Stevenson and Aldrich. Nestled in the returned rejection letters was a single acceptance, from Temptation Software.

[Richard] We had the game accepted, but we didn't get it published because it needed so many changes. It's the reason we stopped, it was exam time, and our parents said it's an important time of the year so you can't be doing that. They wanted lists and lists of changes. [One I remember was] we had "you are near the public house", but we had put it as "you are near the pubic house".

Whereas Richard and Nick approached a publisher, all of SpecSoft's games were self-published, advertised in the small ads at the back of journals such as Popular Computer Weekly and Home Computing Weekly. Even at his age, Mark had the awareness to realise that his games weren't of the same calibre of those that had started appear from publishers such as Artic and Melbourne House, despite the kind words from Tony Bridge.

[Mark] You had the classified ads, and you had the libraries that were hiring out tapes, and that was a good way of your money going further. From memory we did get a few direct sales from the public, but a large majority was selling packs of ten to the loaning libraries.

The volume of sales kept Mark busy, and he undertook the logistics of running his company from his bedroom - from creating the inlays to copying and testing the games for dispatch.

[Richard] [...] What was bizarre was that you'd go in [to Mark's room] and he wouldn't be programming, he was copying the games he'd written. He couldn't produce games quick enough. Ten copies [meant] having to produce ten tapes, [since] we didn't have tape to tape at that point.

[Nick] Two tape recorders with a phono jack between them. You had to check your levels, in those days when you played form one to the other, it was all about volume. If it wasn't on 7 you were fucked. It wouldn't load.

[Mark] We weren't good at our quality control. To check anything, you'd have to take each copy and load them – it'd take five to ten minutes each tape. We sent a whole set of tapes to a library, and got them all returned, they'd not been able to load. We'd been sloppy about checking them.

[Nick] We used to draw the [inlay] artwork and then we used to go

down to Pront-a-print and they could only print in black and white, but you could have coloured cardboard. So each game would have different coloured cardboard – green, yellow and pink for example. A lot of them were neon and we used to sit and copy the cassettes, write on them, put them in jiffy bags and send them in the post. We were very entrepreneurial [and] there was a bit of professionalism about doing things right.

[Mark] [Printing] cost about £50. [...] Because [it was] so expensive John found [another guy] and he printed from home. He ran a small print business and we went to his house and talked him through [each game], gave him the blurb, and he came up with something. It was a fifth of what it cost us. For the whole time we probably made a few grand between us.

The coffers were buoyed a little more when Mark was contacted by a speculative computer company in Scotland, offering him a smart sum for the rights for the three adventures as content for the new platform. The machine never materialised, but the cheque did. In the end, it was the call of University life and the lure of an academic career that ended Mark's adventure coding. John went to Portsmouth to study Philosophy, and the two naturally drifted apart into the atmosphere of student life - with computers a minor attraction.

[Mark] I was academic and always going to university. I wanted to do law - someone said I quite enjoyed an argument. [...] Writing stuff, that did takes hours and hours of hard work, and was physically and mentally hard [didn't appeal]. You then get on that conveyor belt of life. I do think what would it have been – but at the time you didn't look to computers to make money, nobody had any idea of where it was going. It was a hobby.

For Nick and Richard it was the end of their creative relationship after just one game. Another member of the Computer Club, Phil Durbidge started to work with Richard, and Phil had one advantage that Nick didn't – he could program in machine code.

[Nick] Phil came round and three became a crowd. Phil had skills that I hadn't. I wasn't a programmer. Richard looked up to Phil. All I was the guy that made pictures and drew things, it was my creativity that Richard brought alive. I became the crowd. Richard started developing with Phil, and he became the new Nick, but better. It was great to be an early part of it, but I was only an early part of it.

The duo became Dollarsoft [named by Richard's coin-collecting Dad] and started work on a brand new game, this time an arcade clone of *Bombjack* called *Bombscare*. Whilst he was working with Phil, Richard continued to write adventures.

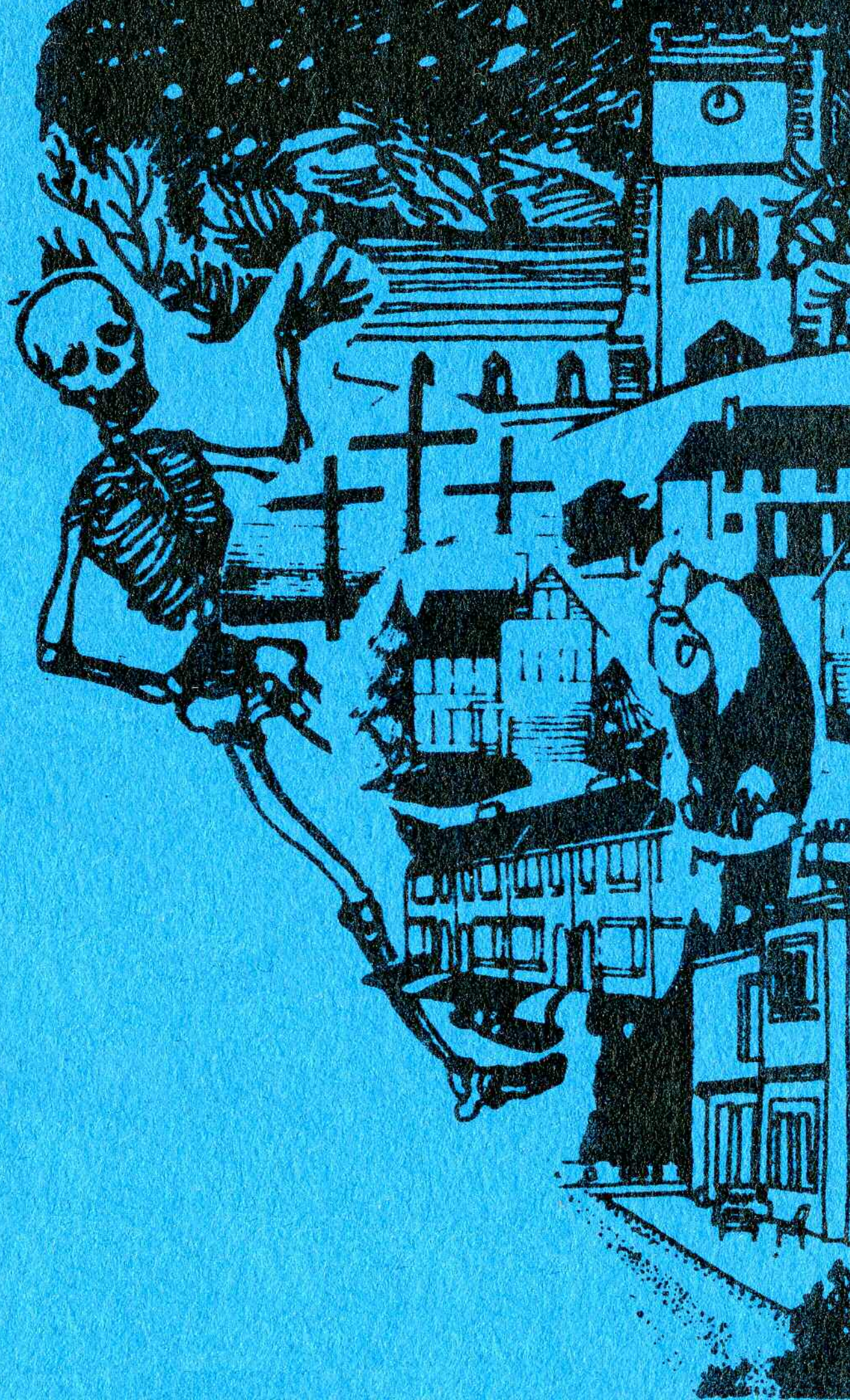
[Richard] I felt I'd do another [adventure] and did a game called *Suicide Island*. The format was the same as *The Haunted House*, and was based on a grid where you had to get from A to B. It wasn't the same code but was the same methodology, with the odd added bit. I was looking at other adventures and saw they added objects and characters and things, so I added a character, called Josh. I tried to make it sound medieval and mysterious, Josh must have been a mysterious name to me!

Suicide Island appeared on the ZX Spectrum, but strangely had a port to the Acorn Electron and BBC Micro - computers that Richard didn't own. It was another member of the Computer Club called Chris Hallatt who was paid a small fee by Richard's Dad to produce it.

[Richard] I met Chris at School. He wasn't a co-author, he was part of the computer club, not quite as advanced as me, but he had an Electron. He wasn't interested in adventures, we just agreed he would convert it to the Electron.

It seemed to be a straight-forward conversion, but since Richard has never played the Acorn versions their accuracy hasn't been established. Hallett didn't contribute any further puzzles, and omitted the graphics that the second version of *Suicide Island* included.

[Richard] The inspiration was *The Hobbit*. It was a case of picking



draw routines, something like a door, and fill routines I took from a magazine. It would have been an x and y coordinate and fill above it. I'd be taking these routines, I'll put that in, it might improve things. It was quite easy to build locations, I wasn't a creative writer. I didn't picture it, I just thought, well, the woods is a good location, where can you go from the woods. People like Charles Cecil came with a storyline then the game, I went the other way around.

Suicide Island was reviewed by Micro Adventurer in July 1984 who said that "Suicide Island lacks in atmosphere, [and is] aptly named as it constantly self-destructs." Tony Bridge, in Popular Computing Weekly, gave the game a dose of particularly stinging criticism. "The game [...] is awfully dull", he commented, saying "after a while, I just couldn't be bothered." The bad press wrangled with Richard's father, especially as he'd paid £75 [a considerable sum at the time] for several small adverts to be placed with the magazine.

[Richard] The reviews upset my Dad, and he had a bit of a written argument with the [Popular Computing Weekly] editor. In those days, because of his line of work, he didn't understand reviews, that people could slate a game and it was an opinion. He didn't want to place any more adverts with them. Looking back, adventures advanced and people were playing each others games for ideas. I wasn't. It was irrelevant what anyone else was doing.

Richard did forge on, and his next game was called *The Black Tower*. It was a game inspired by the staple teenage stories and influences of Knights, Castles and Princesses. It's adolescent and innocence was reflected in the inlay blurb: "Meet exciting people, visit interesting places and solve difficult problems in your quest to find the scroll." Though the text was somewhat naive, the quality of the Dollarsoft

inlays had improved, as Richard's Dad began to adapt to what retailers were telling him they wanted. Out went Richard's own designs, based on the split-screen contrasts using in games such as Imagine's *Zzoom* ["with another function from a magazine for double-sized text"] and in came piece of professional work.

[Richard] My Dad [had taken previous games] to Just Micro and another shop on Ecclesall Road that had racks of [budget] games. They told my Dad that the game artwork wasn't up to scratch so he contacted an artist in Totley. He didn't want the commission but did have a couple of pieces he'd done previously that suited.

Alongside the new artwork, computer pixeler Marco Druroe provided the game with a decent loading screen. Marco was part of the Just Micro demo scene - a group of teenagers that would come into the shop on a weekly basis showing off their latest creations to each other. The work Marco produced for *Black Tower* had always been a topic of discussion and confusion given the choice of prominent character central to the design.

[Richard] We congregated in Just Micro and [Marco] brought lots of [examples of] artwork. [...] Phil and I went over to his house and he showed us a graphic of a man, who I later found out was George Orwell. Marco wanted to add bits, so asked what was in the game. We said a graveyard, etc - and so he chucked them in.

The Dollarsoft sales ledgers show that the games were far from successful, selling in tens of units rather than thousands. It was a huge investment for the Stevenson family with little return, but the disappointing sales figures only told half of the story. Aside of the financial outlay, Richard's Dad was constantly trying to evolve his

own business acumen and Richard and Phil's approach to game development in order to succeed.

[Richard] It was a case of trying to work out what the sales formula was. Other people were making money, [so] what are they doing they we weren't? Companies like Gremlin and Alligata were way ahead. [My Dad] had to try and learn about them, and distributors such as Menzies and WHSmiths, who for the majority took a game by looking at a cover.

But Richard and Phil's true love lay away from adventures and firmly in the arcade. They utilised Phil's machine code programming and created a *Bomb Jack* clone called *Bombscare* - eventually gaining their break after a publishing deal with British Telecom's Firebird label [who renamed the game Short's Fuse]. But there was one last hurrah with the genre, and the last official titles from Dollarsoft were conversions of several Artic Computing adventures for Paxman Publications for the Amstrad CPC464 computer. It wasn't a commission, but a quirk of fate that Richard and Phil were able to obtain the business.

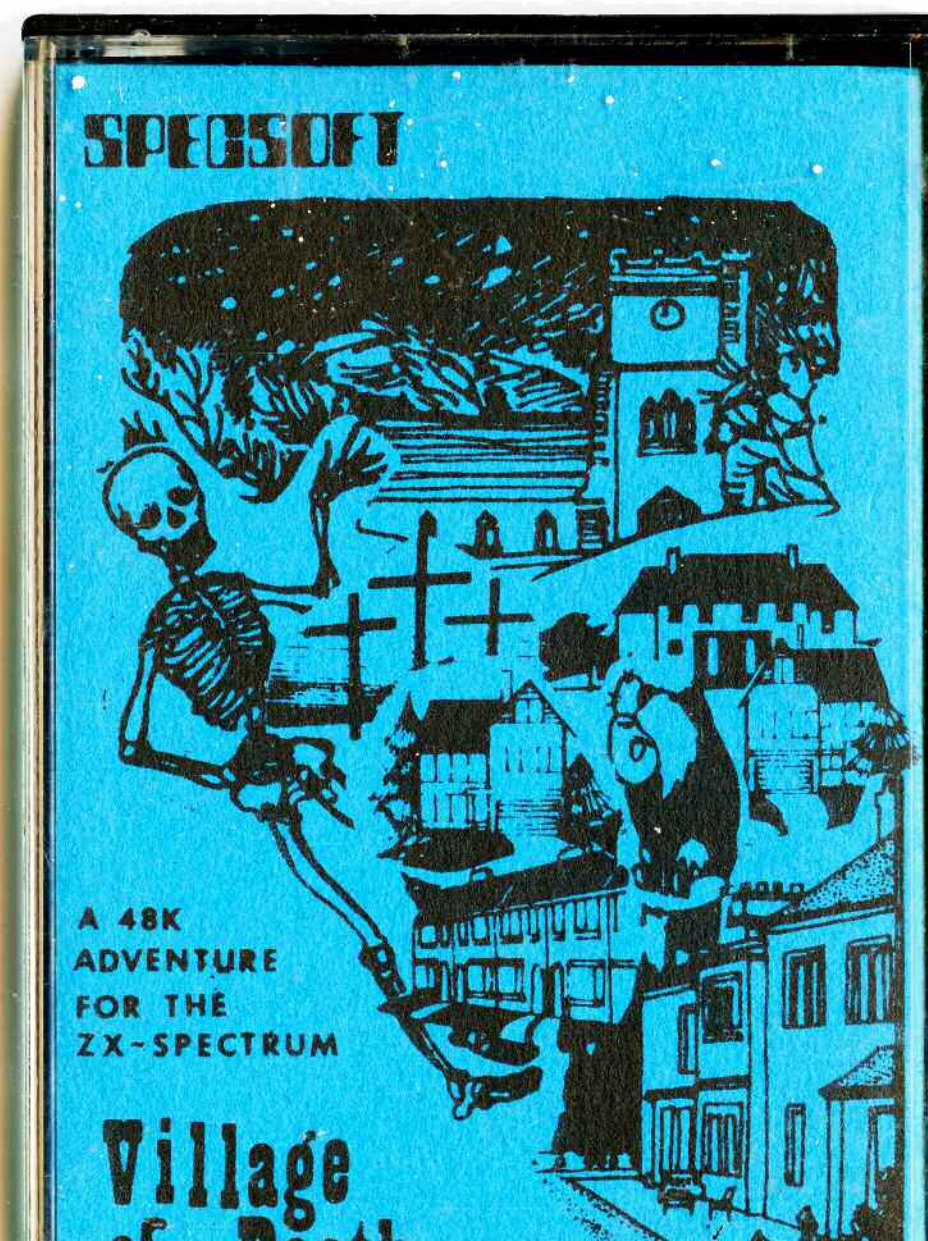
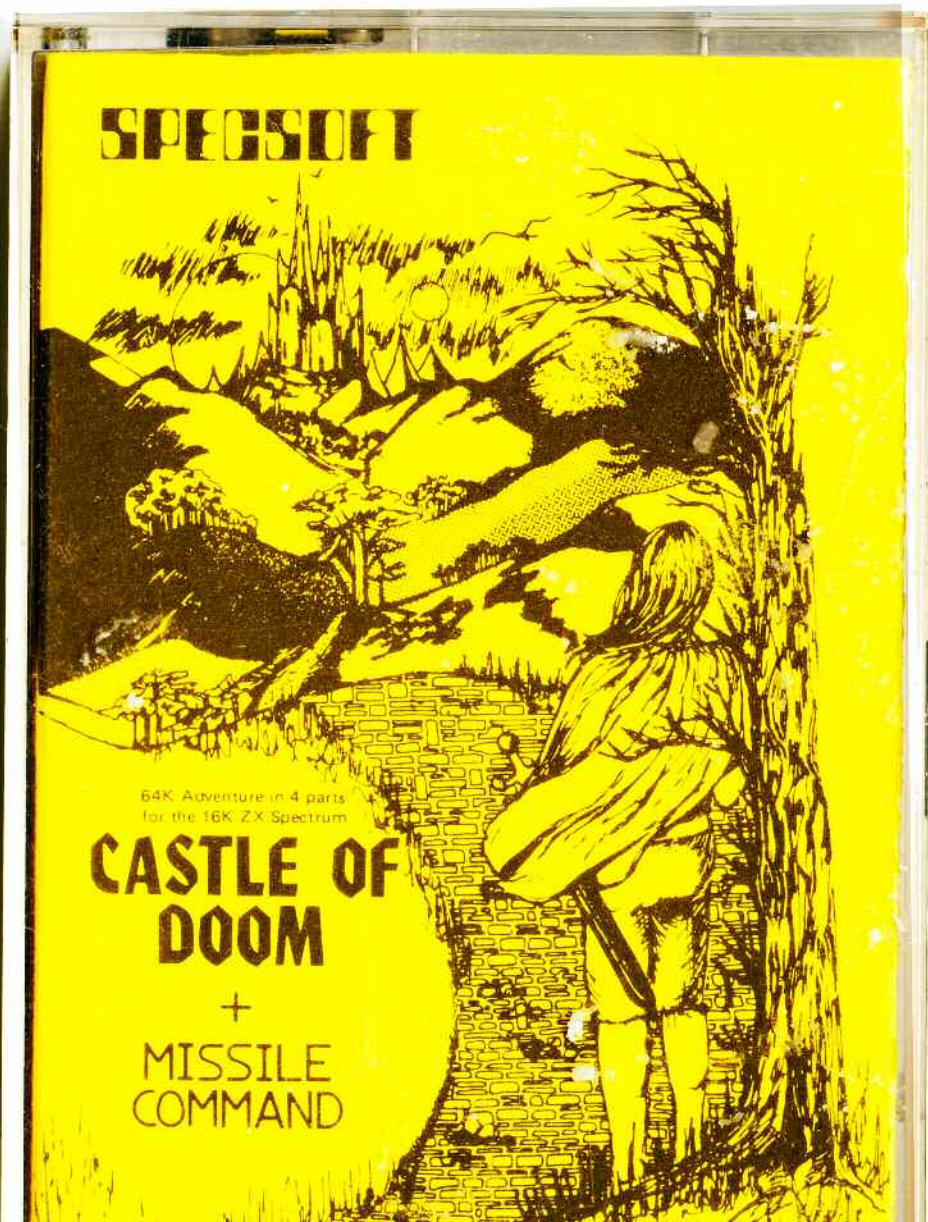
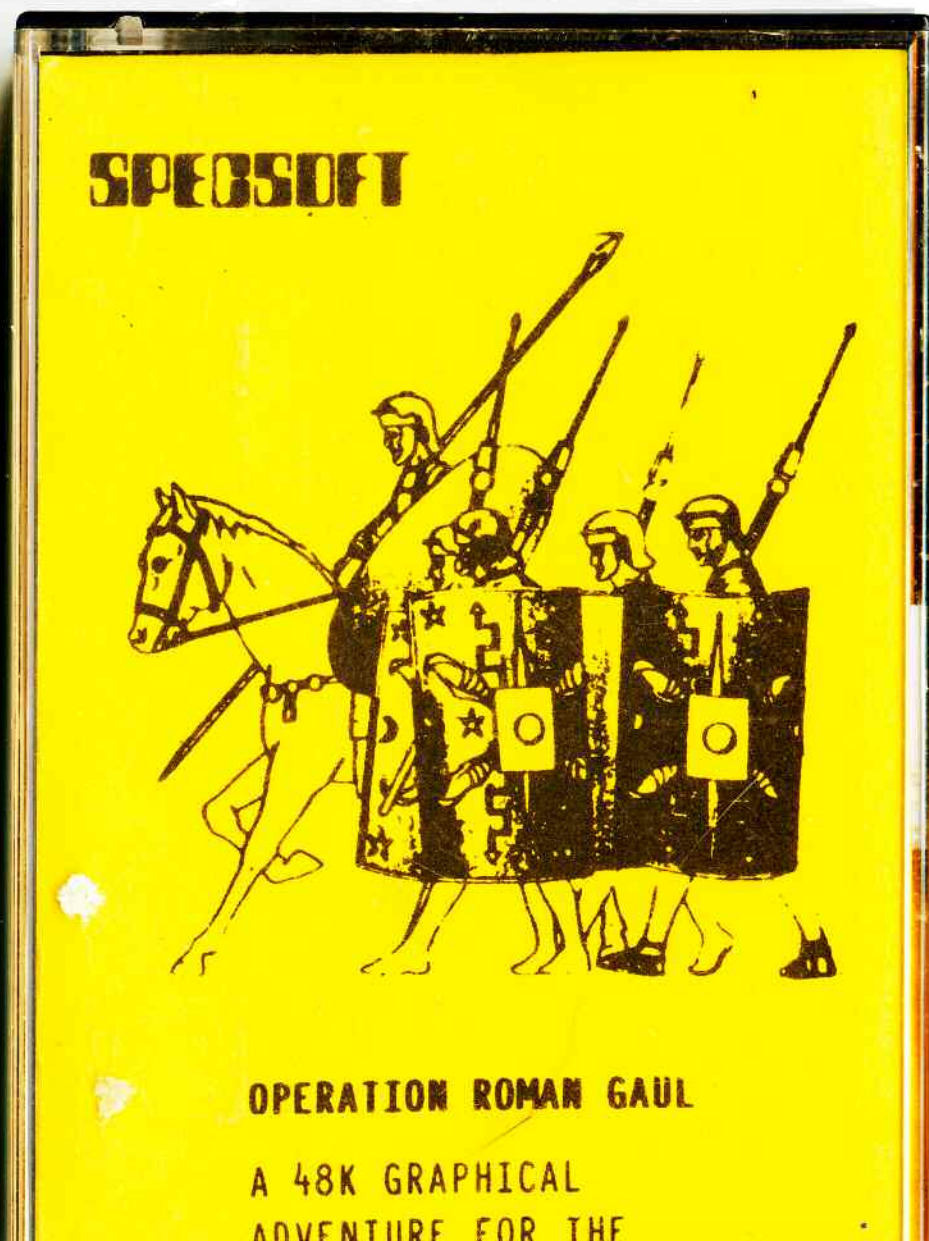
[Richard] That came from a magazine type-in that would load Spectrum code on an Amstrad. We didn't believe it, but it worked. It couldn't do graphics, so it had to be text-based because the displays were different. Phil had a couple of Artic adventures that we'd played a couple of weeks earlier. We loaded *Adventures A and B* using the type-in routines and we looked for Spectrum-specific functions. There was a PRINT statement, INPUT routines and a SAVE routine, that was about it, so we replaced it with the Amstrad versions. It worked. We tested it for an hour and just like that, we'd just converted them.

Popular Computing Weekly and Home Computing Weekly magazines ran articles that covered converting BASIC and graphic screens between the two similar Z80 based machines. With a little bit of tweaking here and there, Richard and Phil had working Amstrad versions of *Planet of Death* and *Ship of Doom*. Richard's father again saw the commercial potential of these ports.

[Richard] [...] He gave Artic a ring and asked if they'd be interested in us converting their games the Amstrad. They asked for a cost and he said £200 a time or something [the recovered ledger from Dollarsoft shows that Artic paid just £25 each for the conversions]. We agreed that we would do them all, but stopped at *D* because *E* introduced graphics. There was *Planet of Death*, *Inca Curse*, *Ship of Doom* and *Espionage Island*. We paid my brother Ian to reformat the text to make sure they fitted on [the Amstrad] screen.

Sadly Phil Durbidge passed away in January 2018 after a period of illness. He spent some of his attempted convalescing getting back into Spectrum programming. He was looking forward to the Spectrum Next arriving and there was even talk of Dollarsoft reforming to create a new version of *Bombscare* and further adventures. Richard hopes to honour that commitment.

[Richard] I want to write another adventure, but properly this time. I've three or four partial ideas that I'm going to code from scratch. I want to play with a type of Cluedo-approach where there could be four or five outcomes, with multiple locations and multiple characters.



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Commodore Computing International, Issue XXX

The Illustrator [ZX Spectrum]
Matej Jan

Heroes of Karn and The Illustrator
Terry Greer

The Classic Adventurer
Written and designed by Mark James Hardisty

About the author

Mark James Hardisty is from Sheffield. His weekly pilgrimage to Just Micro as a child left him with an indelible love for Gremlin Graphics.

You can find Mark at @hardistymark, where he tweets about games, getting kids coding, The Cannonball Run, and his favourite game - *Elite* on the Acorn Electron.

This work is dedicated to:

My wonderful family – my mum Val, my beautiful wife Helen, and daughters Amelia Rose and Kitty Mae.

Fergus McNeill, a genius, and one of the kindest and humblest people I have had the pleasure of meeting.



